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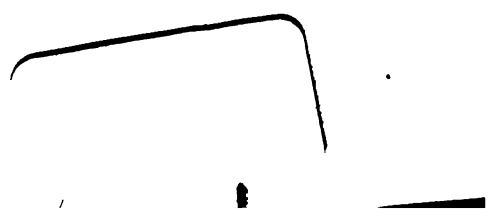
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PHOEBE

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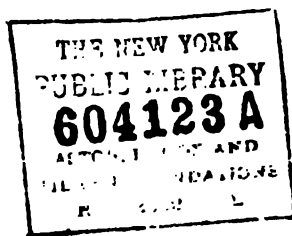
AUTHOR OF "THE POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL," "WE ARE SEVEN,"
"AFROE STRINGS," "THE FLOW-WOMAN," ETC.

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IT IS**

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PHOEBE



PHOEBE

CHAPTER I

"Dear little daughter," ran the telegram, "when you get this, fill a suit-case with a few things that you'll need most, and leave with Daddy for Grand-ma's.—Mother."

THE train was already moving. Phoebe, with all the solemnity of her fourteen years, puckered her brows over the slip of yellow paper, winked her long lashes at it reflectively, and pursed a troubled mouth. How strange that dear Mother should leave the New York apartment in mid-morning, with the usual gay kiss that meant short separation; and then in that same hour should send this message—this command—which was to start Phoebe away from the great city, where all of her short life had been spent, toward that smaller city where lived the Grandmother she had never seen, and the two Uncles—one a Judge and the other a

clergyman—who, though her father's own brothers, were yet strangers to their only niece!

Somehow, without having to be told, Phœbe had always understood that Mother did not like Grandma, or the Uncles, judicial and ecclesiastic. Then why was Mother, without a real farewell, and without motherly preparation in the matter of dress, and with no explanations, sending Phœbe to those paternal relations?

It was all very strange! It was mysterious, like—yes, like stories Phœbe had seen in moving-pictures.

Out of the gloom and clangor of the great station, the train was now fast winding its way, past lights that burned, Phœbe thought, like those in the big basement of the apartment house where she had lived so long. Now the coach was leaving one pair of rails for a new pair—changing direction with a sharp clicking of the wheels and a heavy swaying of the huge car's body. And now the line of coaches was straightening itself to take, as Phœbe knew, that long plunge under the southward flowing Hudson.

She let the telegram fall to her lap and closed her eyes, with a drawing in of the breath. She was picturing all that lay above the roof of the car and

the larger domed roof of the tunnel—first there was the river-bed, which the domed roof upheld; next, the wide, deep reach of water which, in turn, held up the ferries and any other passing ships; last of all, the sky, cloud-flecked and sun-lit, through which winged the birds. What a load for that narrow, domed roof!

Her father had been busy with the luggage, directing the porter about the disposal of the two suitcases while taking off his own overcoat and hat. But as he glanced down at Phœbe, he misunderstood the lowering of telegram and eyelids, and dropped quickly to a place beside her. His hand closed over hers, lovingly, and with a pressure that showed concern. "Phœbe?" he questioned tenderly.

She opened her eyes with a sudden reassuring smile. Though in the last three or four years her father had been absent from home long months at a time, so that during any year she might see him only seldom, and then for brief afternoons only, her affection for him was deep, and scarcely second to her love for her mother. Each visit of his was marked by gifts as well as by a holiday outing—to the Park, the Zoo, or some moving-picture

theatre; so that gratitude and pleasure mingled with her happiness at seeing him. Also, his visits had, for her, the novelty and joy of the unexpected. He came from Somewhere—mysteriously; and went again, into an Unknown that Phœbe made a part of her day-dreams.

And so her love for him was tinged with something of the romantic. She was proud of him, and she thought him handsome. Her mother never exclaimed over him, but other people did. "Was that your father I saw you with yesterday?" they would ask; and when Phœbe said Yes, they would add, "Oh, but *isn't* he good-looking!" All of which delighted Phœbe, who long since had compared him with the heroes she had seen pictured on the screen—which comparison was to the very great disadvantage of the film favorites. Her father was to her so gallant a figure that she often wondered at her mother's indifference to him. But then mother herself was so lovely!

Phœbe Blair was like her father. Her eyes were gray-blue, and set so far apart on either side of her nose that the upper half of her face, at first glance, had the appearance of being, if anything, a trifle too wide—which made her firm lit-

tle chin seem, correspondingly, a trifle too peaked. Her hair was light brown, thick to massiness, but straight save where it blew against the clear pink of her cheeks in slightly curling tendrils. Of her features, it was her mouth that challenged her eyes in beauty—a fine, sweet mouth that registered every mood of those grave and womanly eyes. As for her height, it was a matter of the greatest pride to her that she already reached to her father's shoulder. But she was, despite her height, still the little girl—sailor hat on bobbed hair, serge jacket worn over blue linen dress, slim, brown-stockinged legs, and laced brown shoes.

Her father was thirty-seven. It seemed an almost appalling age to his small daughter. And yet he still had a boyish slenderness. He was tall, and straight, with a carriage that was noticeably military—acquired at the preparatory school to which his elder brothers had sent him. His hair, brown and thick like his daughter's, was just beginning to show a sprinkling of gray at the temples. His eyes were Phœbe's eyes—set wide apart, given to straight looking, and quick, friendly smiles. He had presented her with his straight nose, too, and his mouth. But his chin was firmer than hers, a man's chin, and

the chin of a man who, once having set forward on any course, does not turn back.

Phœbe thought him quite perfect. And she thought it wonderful that he should be a mining-engineer. "It's a clean business," he had told her once, when she was about ten years of age. "It takes a man into the big out-doors." She had treasured up what he had said—turned it over in her mind again and again. And had come to feel that her father was entirely different from the men whom she met in her home—a man set wholly apart.

His profession explained to her his long absences from New York, and the fact that, in the last year or so, he had been compelled to make a club his headquarters during the period of his short stays in the city. "This place is so tiny," Phœbe's mother always said. "And all Daddy's traps are at the Club." It had never occurred to Phœbe to doubt anything that Mother told her. And did not her father fully corroborate this excuse of Mother's? Phœbe longed to have her father stay at home when he arrived in town. But she never complained against his being away. Hers was a patient, a trusting, a sturdy little soul.

With her smile of reassurance, Phœbe had leaned toward her father, to speak confidingly. "You know, Daddy," she began, "it seems so funny that Mother had me go the way she did. Don't you think so?—without saying why she wanted me to leave, or—or anything? Did she say anything about it to you?"

"Well, you see," her father answered, "having you go this way spared your dear little heart. No good-byes, or tears. But pretty soon Grandma's, with Uncle Bob, and Uncle John, and a big garden, and a horse——"

"A horse!" marveled Phœbe.

"Oh, he's an old horse, and he pulls the surrey. Because Uncle Bob won't have a motor car—he wants to walk to and from the Court House, and keep down his weight, and——"

"Uncle Bob is fat?" Phœbe inquired.

"Well, stout. And Uncle John, being a clergyman, and a trifle particular, doesn't believe ministers should rush around in automobiles. So the surrey is for Uncle John, but Grandma will let you drive for her sometimes. And there are ducks and chickens to feed, and big beds of flowers, and a tall,

green hedge where the birds build their nests, and——”

“And when will Mother come?” interposed Phœbe, with an intonation which made plain her opinion that it would certainly take mother to make the suburban picture complete.

“Phœbe,” said her father, speaking with a new earnestness, “Mother is not very well, and she is planning to leave New York for a while, and go where she can get better.”

“I know she isn’t very well,” agreed Phœbe. “She coughs too much.”

“Exactly. You know, Mother’s health hasn’t been good for quite a while——”

“I know.”

“And she must have the change. I didn’t want to have you go, dear, to a strange city, where your mother has no friends, and might be very ill. So away you go to Grandma’s till everything is straightened out. And you’ll—— Oh, look at that automobile!—there! It’s keeping up with the train! My! My! but that’s considerable speeding!”

They talked of other things then,—of the homes past which they were rushing, the towns through

which they glided and grandly ignored, except for a gingerly slowing down. Noon came, and with it a visit to the dining-car. Then the afternoon dragged itself along. Toward the latter half of it, Phœbe, worn by the excitement of the sudden departure, and lulled by the motion of the train, curled up on the green plush of the car seat and fell asleep, her short brown hair spread fanwise upon her father's shoulder.

The afternoon went; twilight came. Still the train rushed on, carrying Phœbe northward toward that new home awaiting her. She slept a second time, after a simple supper. Her journey was to end shortly before midnight. For this reason her father judged it best that a berth should not be made up for her, but that she should rest as she had in the afternoon, her head on his breast.

She smiled as she slept, blissfully unaware that all at once her happy life was changing; that she was being uprooted like some plant; that a tragedy of which she was as yet mercifully ignorant had come forward upon her, wave-like and overwhelming, to sweep her forever from her course!

CHAPTER II

A RAIN was drenching the blackness of the night as the New York train reached the small city that was Phoebe's destination. Her father had wakened her a little in advance of their stop, and when she had washed her face and smoothed her hair, she had peered through the double glass of a car window a-stream with water—and then recoiled from the panes with a sinking of the heart. How dark it was out there! how stormy! how lightless after a life-time in a city which, no matter at what hour she might awake, was always alight!

A long whistle made her catch up her hat and adjust its elastic under her chin. The porter had already taken her father's suit-case and her own to the forward end of the coach. With a wild thumping in her breast and a choking in her throat, she followed her father to the vestibule, where the porter waited with the suit-case and a small, square stool upon which, presently, she stepped down to meet the rain.

There was a single light in the station, and beside it leaned a young man in an agent's cap. With her hand on her father's arm—for he was carrying both of the cases—she crossed a double line of glistening rails to the depot, not taking her eyes from the agent, who represented to her, at the moment, the sole sign of life and refuge in that black, roaring downfall.

Then, "Jim!"

"Hello, Bob!" Her father dropped the luggage and stretched both hands out to a figure that had emerged, in a shining raincoat, from the blackness.

"And Phœbe!" exclaimed Uncle Bob, lifting Phœbe from her feet and at the same time turning himself about, so that she was carried forward to the shelter of a roof. "God bless her! We'll jump into the surrey, Jim, and I'll have you home in a jiffy. What a ghastly night!—It'll take the snow off, Phœbe. But we'll have more. And then for some sleigh-rides!"

The train was gone, booming into the distance, with parting shrieks that grew fainter and fainter. As Phœbe was helped to the rear seat of the surrey, Uncle Bob holding aside the curtains that shut

out the storm, she turned her head to look through the night to where great sparks were going up with the smoke of the engine. The train was leaving her—that train which seemed her only link with New York, with the beloved apartment that was to her the home-nest, with her mother—her dear, beautiful mother.

Phœbe gulped.

From the front seat sounded her uncle's voice—a nice voice, she concluded, though not at all like Daddy's. As if he understood something of what she was feeling—the lostness, the loneliness, the sensation of being torn up and thrust out—her father had taken his seat beside her and put an arm about her, drawing her so closely to him that, for comfort, she was forced to take off her hat. The surrey was moving. And its two side-lamps were casting a rain-blurred light upon the flanks of a bay horse. Phœbe peered forward at the horse. She had pictured him after horses she had seen in Central Park—shiny-coated saddlers, or carriage pairs, proud and plump and high-stepping, with docked tails and arching necks. But this horse was almost thin, and moved slowly, with a *plop-plop-plop* through the miry puddles of the unpaved

street. This horse had a long tail, and his head was on a level with his back. Phœbe was disappointed.

The drive took some time. Yet conversation lagged, and was a one-sided affair between Uncle Bob and the horse, in which the former urged the latter to "Get up" and "Go 'long." Here and there a street light shone with a sickly yellow flame through the pelting drops. Phœbe tried to see something of the town, to right and left over Uncle Bob's wide shoulders. But only the dim outlines of buildings were discernible. Strange and stormy was the little she could see. And there rose in her a feeling against this town into which she was come; so that, with Grandma and Uncle John still to meet and know, she yet longed for a quick turn-about, and a train that would carry her away again—away and away to the great city, to her little bed and her pretty mother.

The s Surrey drew up beside a large house that showed a dozen glowing windows, and as the wheels scraped the boards of a step, voices called out in greeting, and Uncle Bob answered them. "I've got 'em!" he cried. Whereupon a hand pulled at the curtain of the s Surrey on Phœbe's side, and here,

under an umbrella, was a tall, thin gentleman in black, who wore eye-glasses and had large teeth. "Our dear little niece!" he exclaimed. And Phœbe climbed down to him, steadying herself by his hand, and was led by him to a wide door where Grandma was waiting—a slender little lady in a gray dress.

Phœbe permitted herself to be kissed, first by Grandma, then by Uncle John, as the man with large teeth proved to be, then by Uncle Bob, who had shed his rain-coat and now stood forth, a heavy-set person, quite bald, and apple-cheeked, with smiling blue eyes.

The greetings over, Phœbe fell back a step, felt for and found her father's hand, and then lost herself in contemplation of the trio of new relatives. Of them, Daddy had, assuredly, spoken frequently. But, man-like, he had never essayed a description of them, never endowed them either with virtues or faults, never taught her in advance to render to the three any love or loyalty. So that now, appraising them, Phœbe was unprejudiced in her judgment, and viewed them as she might have viewed three strangers who were not related. How very old Grandma was! Phœbe noted that the white head trembled steadily, as if Grandma were, per-

' naps, cold. As for Uncle John, there was something altogether forbidding about him—eye-glasses, teeth and all. Aloofness was a part of her feeling toward this clerical uncle. But Uncle Bob—upon his apple-round cheeks glistened drops that Phœbe knew were not rain. And his eyes were shining with something that Phœbe recognized—the something she knew as love. He was big, he was round, he was, oh, so very homely. But straightway, with a child's true instinct, Phœbe loved him.

Behind the three was another figure. Phœbe first glimpsed the white apron, which to her city-bred eyes meant that here was a maid. And such a funny maid, in a lavender dress, with no cap on tousled yellowish hair that had been kinked rather than curled. The maid had a wide, grinning mouth, and eager, curious, hazel eyes. Yet altogether she was a likeable person, Phœbe decided. Youth spoke to youth across the Blair sitting-room. So that when all were seated in the high-ceilinged dining-room for a bite of supper, Phœbe answered Sophie's smile with one of her own, and for the cup of steaming chocolate that was set at her plate murmured a friendly "Thank you."

The supper was a quiet affair. Grandma bobbed

and nodded over her chocolate, speaking only when Sophie was to fetch something or when one of the three men needed to be urged to another helping. Uncle John spoke not at all—after he had said what Phœbe afterwards learned was “a blessing”. He looked at his food crossly. Phœbe’s father had little to say, too. He looked tired and white. And when he smiled at Phœbe, he seemed not to see her, but to be looking beyond somehow. Only Uncle Bob appeared cheerful. His eyes danced when Phœbe lifted her eyes to him shyly. Every now and then he patted her shoulder. But—compared by her New York standards—Phœbe voted the supper altogether dreary—the result, she felt sure, of having Uncle John present.

A little later, she was conducted to her room by Sophie. How unlike was that strange bed-chamber to the wee, cosy place, all rose hangings and sheer white, which for as long as her memory could trace had held her white bed and the twin one that was her mother’s! The new room was at the top of a long, wide stairway that wound back upon itself. The new room was high, and surely as large, Phœbe thought, as all of the New York apartment made into one. It had lace curtains at both

windows, and there was an old-style dressing-table, slabbed over its top with mottled marble. When Phœbe touched the marble, she drew back from it, and stared, a little amazed. It was so cold!

Sophie seemed to guess something of what was passing through Phœbe's mind. "I'll just put a fancy towel on it t'morra," she promised. "Ain't had time today."

"Thank you," murmured Phœbe. Certainly the dressing-table needed something.

Sophie hung about for a little, shifting her weight from one substantial foot to the other, and making offers of aid. Could she unpack Phœbe's jo-dandy suit-case? Phœbe replied with a polite, "No, thank you." Could she unbutton the blue linen dress? ("My, it's pretty!") Again, "No, thank you." Then the windows had to be raised a trifle, and lowered again because of the rain. There were two windows, great, high affairs against which tall green blinds were fastened. Next, Sophie displayed the clothes-closet, and hung Phœbe's serge coat on a nail. Last of all, she caught up the two thick pillows on the wide bed, beat them as a baker beats his dough (and with a touch of something

almost like temper), flung them down into place once more, and grudgingly sidled to the door.

Phœbe, standing in the middle of the floor, hat still in hand, made a pathetic little figure that appealed to Sophie's heart. "Ain't there anything I can do?" she inquired, persisting.

Phœbe nodded. "If—if Daddy will please come up to kiss me good-night," she answered, choking; "and—and put out my light."

"I'll tell him, you betcha," declared Sophie, heartily. She went out, turning her tousled head to smile a good-night.

Phœbe hurried with her undressing. There was no running water in the big room, and she could not bring herself to open her door and call down, or go down, in quest of it. Presently, however, she caught sight of a tall pitcher standing in a wide, flowered bowl, both atop what seemed to be a cupboard. She went to peer into the pitcher. Sure enough! The pitcher was full of water; and Phœbe, using all the strength of her slender arms, heaved it up and out and filled the bowl.

"How funny!" she marveled. And once in bed, with a single electric light shining full into her face from where it hung on a cord from the high

center of the ceiling, she studied the room itself, walls, furniture, curtains, carpet. "How queer!" she murmured, over and over.

"Well, big eyes!" hailed her father, when he came in.

She raised on an elbow. "Daddy," she whispered, "isn't it so—so different here—everything. Why, in New York nobody has water-pitchers."

Her father laughed. "This is a wonderful old house," he declared. He sat down beside her.

"It's so big!" Phœbe lay back. Her hand crept into her father's and she looked up at the high ceiling, with its covering of wall-paper in a wavy, watered design.

"You'll get used to it," he promised, "and you'll like it. And do you know how happy Grandma is to have you?—Uncle John and Uncle Bob, too? I can see they love my little girl already."

"And they'll love Mother," added Phœbe, stoutly. "You just wait till she comes back well again. Won't they, Daddy?"

Her father rose, and the smile in his eyes gave place to an expression of sudden pain. "I don't doubt it," he answered hastily. Then leaning to smooth back the hair from her brow, "You're tired,

aren't you, darling? And so is Daddy. We'll say good-night now, and in the morning there'll be so much to see, and do, and talk about."

"Yes, sir."

He laid his cheek against hers, so babyish still. "God bless my daughter," he said tenderly.

Her arms went round his neck then. "Oh, Daddy," she implored brokenly, "how long will I be away from mother? Oh, Daddy, just one day and I miss her so!"

He soothed her. "I can't tell, Phœbe," he asserted. "But will you trust me to do the best that I know how?"

With her wide eyes upon him, he stood at the middle of the room, his right arm raised to put out the electric light. He pulled at the cord, and the room went dark. He felt his way to the door then, and went out with a last affectionate good-night which Phœbe answered cheerily enough.

But when the sound of his footsteps died away in the hall, she stared into the blackness, seeing him still there at the room's center with his arm up-raised. And her loneliness and loss she told silently to that picture of her father which still remained under the swinging globe in the blackness.

"I want Mother," she said, over and over. "Oh, Daddy, I want to go back to New York, to Mother. Oh, Daddy, don't leave me here without Mother." Then, "Oh, Mother, if I could only be with you! Oh, dear, dear Mother!"

The tears came then,—tears of weariness as well as grief. And Phœbe, curled up in the wide bed, her face buried in the curve of an arm, sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER III

A FAIRY bell was tinkling. The clear tones were part of a dream so sweet, though afterwards not remembered, that Phœbe smiled in her sleep. The tinkling grew steadily louder. Phœbe waked, saw where she was, and raised her head to listen. The bell was outside. Persistent and musical, its ringing called Phœbe from her bed to a window. She peered down through a gap in the storm shutters.

A messenger boy on a bicycle was coming up the curving drive that led from the front gate to the house. The rain was over. The sun glinted on the metal of his wheel. He disappeared from Phœbe's view under a square, flat roof that was one story below her window.

She ran to put on her shoes and stockings. She splashed her face with the icy water in the flowered bowl, and dressed at top speed. A messenger boy conveyed only one thing to her: a telegram from her mother.

She was right. When she came racing down

to ask, her father was standing by the front door in the big hall, the telegram open in his hand.

He did not permit Phœbe to read the wire, but put it away in the leather case that held his paper money. And he did not reply to it by another telegram when the messenger boy reminded him that there was an answer.

"I'll write your mother," he explained to Phœbe.

After breakfast he sat down to write. That first day at Grandma's, Phœbe learned that during each week-day morning the library was sacred to Uncle John. So Phœbe's father wrote at Grandma's desk in the sitting-room, with Phœbe writing at the sewing-table close by.

Her father's letter was short. His face was stern as he wrote it. Then he paced the floor. Phœbe had often seen him like that in New York. She understood that he was frequently worried over business. And she understood business worries, because she had seen several worried business men in the "movies." Usually they stood over curious machines out of which ran a long narrow strip of paper. And as a rule they ended by committing suicide with a pistol. Phœbe stole anxious glances toward her father as she wrote.

"Darling, darling Mother," ran her letter, "I did as you said. But I hope you're going to tell me to come home right away. It's nice here, only I want you, and I hope I'll be back before Saturday. Your loving daughter, Phœbe."

It was a short letter, since it occurred to Phœbe that perhaps a little of her father's pacing might be due to impatience. She was not a rapid penman.

Her letter finished and folded, she took it to him. "Put this in with yours, Daddy?" she asked.

He stared down at her, not answering for a moment. Then, "Yes," he said, "of course." He added her letter to his, but he did not seal the envelope.

When he was gone, Phœbe sat down to wait. There were things to be seen outside—a barn to explore, and a chicken-coop. Also, Grandma had promised to show Phœbe over the house. But Phœbe was not especially interested. What she wanted most was the return of her father, that she might hear the hour of her return to New York.

Sophie came in to set the living-room to rights. On better acquaintance, there was something ex-

ceedingly attractive about Sophie. Her hair was so bright, her eyes were roguish. She had dimples. In the matter of dress, however, she entirely lacked that black-and-white smartness which Sally, Mother's colored maid, possessed. Remembering Sally gave Phœbe a happy thought: Here was the one, of all those in the big house, who would be a pleasant companion to the local "movies."

"Is there a moving-picture theatre in this town?" she asked.

"Is there!" cried Sophie. "I should say! Many as nine, I guess."

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

"Mm." Sophie looked doubtful, somehow. But she kept her own counsel. "I seen a grand picture last night," she confided.

"Did you! Oh, tell me about it!"

First, for some reason, Sophie went to the door and looked out into the hall. Then, launching into her story, she dropped her voice. "It was all about awful rich folks," she began. "There was a girl, and you seen her at the start in her papa's viller. He's so rich that his hired men wear knee pants."

The story grew. With it mounted Phœbe's interest and Sophie's enthusiasm. And when Sophie

was done, Phœbe in turn remembered a picture full of high adventure and love that put danger to scorn.

"The horse jumped off a fast train," she related. "And the brave young cow-boy fell to the water below. But horses can swim. This horse made for shore, and the cow-boy swam along beside him. The waves were high—it must have been the ocean. Now you saw him, now you didn't. But he got closer and closer to land. Pretty soon the horse touched bottom. You saw the cow-boy was safe. When there, on the beach, stood the villain—with a gun in his hands!"

"Phœbe." Her father had entered. He was frowning at Sophie.

"Daddy!" Phœbe ran to him. "Oh, there are nine movie theatres in this town, Sophie says. Oh Daddy, I'd like to go to one this afternoon."

"But, Uncle John, Phœbe," said her father.

She did not understand. "Couldn't Sophie take me?"

"Phœbe, your Uncle John is a clergyman," explained her father, his voice grave. "If his niece goes to the movies, that looks as if he approves of them. And he doesn't."

Phœbe stared, aghast. "But Mother took me hundreds of times," she reminded.

"Not in this town, dear."

"But can't I even see travel pictures?"

"I'm sorry."

Phœbe sat down, dumbfounded. Sophie went out quietly, without lifting those roguish eyes.

Phœbe's father came over to his daughter, and rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "In this house," he said, speaking very low, "the less my little girl says about the movies the better."

"Yes, sir," answered Phœbe, dutifully.

But rebellion came into her heart that first morning. And thereafter her Uncle John, rector of the town's most exclusive church, and undeniably a most devout man, was to play the rôle of villain in the drama which Phœbe felt that she was living.

The subject of moving-pictures was forgotten temporarily when more fairy tinklings announced the arrival, about noon, of a second messenger boy. He had still another telegram from Phœbe's mother. And this time he waited while Phœbe's father wrote out an answer. Then he went tinkling away.

"Is Mother anxious about us, Daddy?" Phœbe wanted to know.

"Yes, darling. But we're all right here, aren't we?—for a little while."

"I guess so," said Phœbe, without enthusiasm.

A third telegram came later on in the day, and a fourth that evening. The day following brought others. More arrived the day after that. Phœbe's father answered some of them in kind, others by letter. After the arrival of the first one he had taken on something of a resigned, almost cheerful, air, and had explained each message to Phœbe, declaring laughingly that her mother would burn up the telegraph wires; while Phœbe, with her numerous letters, would put a terrible strain on the local post-office.

Yet for all his gaiety, Phœbe sensed that there was something about it all which she did not understand. For one thing, why did her mother not write to her?

"Has Mother written you?" she asked her father.

"Yes." But though he searched his pockets and the desk, he failed to locate the letter. Also he was not able to remember much that the letter contained.

"Of course," conceded Phœbe, "Mother isn't a very good letter-writer. Whenever you were

away, she'd say, 'You write to Daddy.' And I would. Darling Mother! She never liked to sit down and go at it. She just seems to hate ink."

"That's why she wires," declared Phoebe's father. "It's easy to get off a telegram.—Oh, well."

But Phoebe kept on puzzling over it all. When the telegrams stopped, her father admitted that letters kept on arriving. But he never showed any of them to Phoebe, or read to her from them. He explained that they were about very private matters. "What?" Phoebe asked herself.

Yes, there was something about all this telegraphing and letter-writing which she did not understand.

CHAPTER IV

THERE was something else which Phœbe did not understand. Walking, mittened and warmly clad, over the snow-cruusted half-acre of Grandma's garden, she gave herself up to conjecture. Or in the sitting-room, with Grandma seated nearby, sewing, she puzzled her small head. And when she drove with Uncle Bob into the country, through lanes of naked trees that edged bare fields, she studied his big, good-natured face and wished that she might open her heart and ask him all about it.

That something else which she did not understand was this: a strict watch was being kept upon her—almost as if in fear!

Why? Did they, her father, and her uncles and grandmother, think that, missing her mother, she might run away to New York? Or was it that they guessed how terribly she longed for her mother, and made sure that she should never be left alone? But—if they were sparing her loneliness, why was she not sent to school every day, like other chil-

dren whom she saw clattering along the sidewalk that ran just outside the high hedge? Or why were children not asked into the big Blair garden to play with her? And why did Daddy, who for years had been so busy with his work that he could seldom give her more than a very occasional afternoon, why was he putting aside all work now in order to stay there with her—particularly since Mother, ill and alone, assuredly needed him if she could not have Phœbe?

There were other curious things. She was never permitted to go downtown unless her father accompanied her. She was never allowed to drive alone with Grandma. She might not go to Sunday school or church with Uncle John. And at last she was able to see that a certain iron rule obtained concerning her movements: she could not play in the garden unless Uncle Bob or Daddy was home; and she could not leave Grandma's to walk or drive unless her father or an uncle was in the sallery.

It was all very puzzling.

When people called, Phœbe did not meet them. Sophie, suddenly grown enthusiastic over some ordinary household matter, hurried her upstairs, or down cellar, as the case might be; or took her egg-

hunting to the tall frame chicken-house standing in the back lot.

If the attic received them, Sophie kept a watch upon the garden from the tiny attic window; and as soon as the visitors took their leave, Sophie's interest in the top of the house promptly melted, and Phœbe was coaxed away from the fascinating boxes and barrels that filled the room, and led down to the sitting-room and Grandma. If on the approach of callers Sophie found pressing reasons for going down into the cellar, and taking Phœbe along, the watch that was set on the attic window was transferred to the ceiling of the cellar. For Sophie kept turning her face up at it inquiringly, kept an ear cocked toward that corner of it which was under the wide entrance hall. And when a dull thump announced the shutting of the front door, Sophie invariably found herself ready and eager to leave the cellar for other duties higher up.

"Why don't I ever meet anybody?" Phœbe pondered.

Her mind dwelt on certain dark, dramatic possibilities. In New York, how freely had she tasted of that—to her—most perfect of all joys—the moving-pictures. She went to some temple of the silent

play three or four times every week—sometimes with her mother, but more often with her mother's black maid. Oh, the never lessening lure of the film dramas! The grip of them! The beauty of their heroines! The masterful, handsome heroes in them! The villains always foiled! The maidens consistently saved! Oh, Dustin Farnum! Oh, lovely, dainty Marguerite Clark! Oh, gun-handling, stern and adorable William S. Hart!

And now, her imagination trained, Phœbe, as she considered conditions as she saw them, asked herself if, perhaps, Daddy and the others were not in fear of enemies! of kidnappers! of Mexican bandits! And this new hazard soon came to seem the logical, then the probable, then the true thing.

From a cautious attitude, she changed to actual fear. She began each day with a careful look from her windows, scanning the grounds, the hedges. Once in the open, she looked for foot-prints on the walks leading up to the house. She was always on the alert. And a new look came into the gray-blue eyes—a look of anxious questioning.

It was bad enough in the daytime. But at night she suffered, and dreaded the going-down of the sun. Toward evening she set herself one task: the

lowering of her curtains, but more particularly the curtains of the sitting-room—against the peering in of faces! As twilight came, it seemed to her that the big house gathered into itself more dwellers than just the half-dozen of which she was one. They were up in the attic, these strange visitors, or down in the cellar, or in the closet under the stairs. In her own room at bedtime, having glanced under her four-poster, she locked her clothes-closet against Something which she felt was lurking therein. While before she fell asleep, or if she waked in the still hours, she held her breath and listened—listened. Sometimes there were snappings; sometimes softer sounds came to her, like the creeping of stealthy feet. In the blackness, white shapes sprang up before even her tight-closed eyes—sprang up, wavered, swelled, melted. She covered her head. Never was one small hand left free, lest it be taken by one unknown and clammy!

How she longed to find out about it all, to tell some one all her terrors. Often at night she determined to go boldly to her father the very next morning. Just as often the light of the new day withered her resolution. "If only Mother were here," she told herself. It was easy to confide any-

thing to Mother. But she shrank from opening her heart to her father. What she wanted to know he knew, and could tell her if he wanted her to know.

Then she thought of Sophie. Uncle Bob was not a remote possibility, but Sophie was even more approachable. Phœbe broached her subject diplomatically. "I don't see many people here, do I?" she inquired.

It was so casual that Sophie had no inkling of what lay beneath the innocent question. "You don't lose much, neither," was the grunted rejoinder. (Sophie held local society in high disdain.)

"I knew lots of ladies and gentlemen in New York," Phœbe went on. "Because Mother has so many friends—beautiful ladies, that wear beautiful clothes. And gentlemen who are rich, and have cars, and bring me candy and things."

Sophie was keenly interested. They were in Phœbe's own room on this particular occasion (Phœbe feeling instinctively that she could get better results on her own territory), and Sophie was so eager to hear about New York, and the apartment, and the ladies, and the men, that she sat down,

and asked many questions, only stopping, now and then, to go to the door to look out.

And Phœbe, nothing loath, answered every question—and more. So that Sophie was given a very fair and truthful account of life in the metropolitan apartment—that is, of the life that Phœbe saw between her early waking and her early bed-time.

At the end of this long talk, Sophie was summoned downstairs by Grandma's hand-bell, a round, squat affair, like a school-teacher's bell, which stood on a little table at the foot of the stairs. And a few minutes later, Phœbe, who had trailed down after the maid, came upon her in the library. Sophie was standing close to Grandma, and talking very low; and when Phœbe entered, the two moved apart, somewhat hastily, and Sophie smiled a conscious smile, and looked a little guilty, and began to talk more loudly than was necessary about her duties.

In that moment, Phœbe realized herself cut off from the one being in that big house of grown-ups with whom she had been making ready to share her little confidences. For now it was plain that Sophie could not be trusted.

One thought did not come to Phœbe, namely,

that the strict watch kept upon her had anything to do with her mother.

If the thought had occurred, whom could she have asked? From the very first night of her arrival Phœbe had discovered that Grandma—dear, gentle Grandma, with her mild old eyes and her trembling head—did not care to talk to Phœbe about Mother. Neither did Uncle Bob, who was always so ready to chatter boyishly about all other matters that seemed of interest to his niece. As for Uncle John, she never considered mentioning Mother to him. For one day she had left Mother's photograph on the mantelpiece in the sitting room, and coming for it, she had seen Uncle John with the picture in his hand. When he discovered Phœbe beside him, he stared down at her, and the look in his eyes was not good to see. His lips were drawn back from his shut teeth, too,—as if he were enraged at the photograph. He almost flung it down, and went out with no word.

Phœbe understood. Mother had never liked these three who belonged to Daddy. Naturally, these three did not like Mother. Even for a girl of fourteen that was simple enough.

And Daddy—Phœbe understood that if she men-

tioned her mother to her father, the smile on his face, the light in his eyes, went instantly. And understanding that, she had come to speak seldom to him of the one whose absence was a constant hurt, an ache, a burden.

And now Sophie might not be taken into her confidence. For Sophie, voice lowered and tousled head bobbing close to Grandma's, had been telling over all that Phœbe had told to her. Yes, telling it all over—and what else? For Grandma's face, as Phœbe caught sight of it, was pale and stern, and
) her eyes were wide open and angry behind the round panes of her gold-rimmed spectacles.

Thereafter Phœbe drew more and more into herself. And what she had to confide, she confided to the big old doll that had come with her from New York, packed between two middy-blouses in the suit-case. The big old doll slept with her, too, in the wide bed. And for added comfort, Phœbe put the photograph under her pillow of nights. When the light was out and the covers over her head, she drew the photograph forth and laid her cheek upon it. Cool it was, and smooth, like the open palm of her mother's hand. And held close, thus, it gave forth a faint perfume—

a perfume which Mother had used—which brought Mother near in the dark of the big room—which brought the tears, too, the wearisome sobbing that at last, in turn, brought sleep; and sleep brought dreams—dear dreams of that loved, perfumed presence that now, at times, seemed scarcely more than the figure in a dream.

Phœbe had left New York just after the Christmas holidays—holidays packed with joys as they had never before been packed. For apart from the usual tree with the usual gifts, there had been other things—a horseback ride on a horse that belonged to one of Mother's men friends; a score of drives in a wonderful limousine that was all blue without and a soft sand-color within, and ran as if shod with velvet, though with the strength, Mother said, of eighty horses! And there was a symphony concert, too, in Carnegie Hall, to which whole flocks of children came, and to which Phœbe wore her very best of all white dresses; and there was an afternoon at the Opera, where Mother had wonderful seats in a box which Phœbe understood cost a fortune, and Phœbe saw a great curtain lift to display castles, and forests, soldiers, knights and princesses. And, of course, there was that su-

premiest of joys—the “movies.” In the holidays the “movies” were an everyday delight.

How she longed for them!

However, in the big house she spoke of them only to Sophie, and then in undertones. But in this matter, as in her separation from her mother, she was not to any degree submissive. Her silence indicated that she was; but she was merely biding her time.

It was in January that Phœbe came to the big house. And the something which she did not understand—that being watched, and passed from hand to hand, and kept apart from other children, and out of school—obtained through all the rest of the first month of the new year, and through February and into March.

Then, one day, a sudden change! A quick, bewildering, inexplicable, happy change!

First of all, to herald it, Uncle John telephoned a Miss Simpson, who conducted a school for young ladies, and held a long and animated conversation with that lady—a conversation in which “my niece” and “Phœbe” figured frequently. Next, Daddy appeared with an unclouded face, and sat down at the cottage-organ in Grandma’s sitting-room and

played a little, and sang a song or two, Uncle Bob joining in. Next, wonder of wonders, Phœbe was sent to the nearest drug-store two blocks away, to get something for Grandma—and she was allowed to go by herself!

What had happened?

She did not find out.

This important news, however, she gleaned from her father: Mother was now in New York no longer; she had gone West.

"Isn't Mother any better, Daddy?" she asked anxiously.

"We hope she will be," he answered.

"Did you have a letter?" Phœbe wanted to know.

"Yes, I got the news in a letter."

A wave of scarlet swept up Phœbe's young throat and bathed the earnest little face. News of Mother—from Mother! It choked her, it was all so wonderful. For had not Mother, for a long time, failed to send any word to her and Daddy?

"Oh, a letter?" breathed Phœbe, and there was sweet entreaty in the young eyes.

Her father began to thrust his hands into his pockets, as if searching, just as he had done on

occasions before. Finding no letter, he slapped each pocket with the flat of a hand. He had colored, too. And his forehead was puckered, and he blinked.

"Can't you find it?" breathed Phœbe.

"Well!—Thought I had it. Mm! Sorry. Must've laid it down somewhere."

He did not find the letter. But Phœbe was comforted by knowing it had come. Mother was West, in a city built high above the sea. There she would improve—speedily. So the best thing to do was to wait patiently. And while she waited—go to school!

The school was Miss Simpson's. It was not a school, really, as Phœbe discovered the first day. It was a house—a house very like Grandma's.

Of course there were differences. At Miss Simpson's, for instance, the cellar held a great iron monster-thing with which Phœbe felt on friendly terms. This monster was the boiler, which sent steam-heat to all the various rooms.

There was no boiler in Grandma's cellar, which was broad and high, brick-floored, and walled with cobble-stones. It contained, of course, a coal-bin. And there were other bins that Miss Simpson's

cellar could not boast—bins for potatoes, and turnips. And Miss Simpson had no shelves full of pickles and preserves, and shining cans of lard, no beams from which hung corn and onions and peppers, and hams in their sacking, and smoked bacon in a wrapping of paraffine-paper. She had no pumpkins piled yellowly in one corner, with green cabbages close beside. And where were her pork barrels ranged in a row, topped by tubs holding the eggs that had been “put down,” and the winter supply of butter?

But Miss Simpson’s cellar was much nicer than Grandma’s. For it was just like a New York basement!

Elsewhere, too, Phœbe felt the school to be infinitely more attractive than the Blair home. It was new, it was (Miss Simpson herself said it) modern, and it was built all of brick. Genevieve Finnegan, a girl of Phœbe’s own age, declared that Miss Simpson’s house was stylish; while a teacher, touching on architecture one day, proudly catalogued it as “very English.”

Phœbe did not understand in just what way the school was “very English,” but she did come to realize, through Genevieve, that whatever very Eng-

lish might be, it was something much to be desired for any house. As for Grandma's residence, well, Genevieve was politely scornful.

Phœbe readily understood why.

The Blair house had gone up when Uncle John was a baby, and was typical, in its architecture, of the best suburban houses of those remote times. It had towers—two of them—round and shingled, with points that held lightning-rods. It had fancy cornices, too, and trimmings that were considered marvels of beauty when they were new. Now Genevieve referred to them as "ginger bread." And it had green blinds on its many windows—blinds that had rattled in all the storms of the passing years, but were still intact, testifying to the wood and workmanship of that period of the long-ago.

But the house was "old-fashioned." There was no concealing it—everybody in town knew it. Once, in the days when the Blair house was new, it had stood all to itself, in the center of what was known as Blair Farm. The farm had been cut up into lots later on. Then the big, lonely house had, as it were, drawn the town lovingly to it, and had taken its place as a sort of landmark, rearing its unfashionable turrets among very up-to-date

structures. Genevieve and her mamma, and her papa, together with five servants, were dwellers in one of these structures. Genevieve referred to her home—carelessly—as a “chalet.”

There was nothing to be said in criticism of Miss Simpson’s—even though it was not a chalet. Genevieve declared, and other girls upheld her, that Miss Simpson’s was so unusually splendid in the way of interior woods, marbled entrance-hall, frescoed ceilings and the like that the man who had put it up had “gone broke.” Genevieve said it boastfully. How much further, indeed, could any man go who was putting up a house than to go broke?

Phœbe was convinced.

She was quick to admit to herself that, interiorly at least, there was much to be desired in the way of improvements at Grandma’s. If the big Blair house was not comparable to Miss Simpson’s, it was also far from coming up to the standard of apartments in New York. For example, consider the wall-paper on Grandma’s ceilings, and the colored glass in certain of Grandma’s doors. Crayon reproductions of family photographs were not at all “the thing,” Phœbe knew and Genevieve averred.

Neither were wax flowers modish—and Grandma had so many frames of them! And then there was that little item of lace curtains. Phœbe did not have to be told that nobody who really knew would, in these later and wiser times, go out and buy lace curtains.

Phœbe did not see the upper floors of Miss Simpson's; but the street floor was proof of what might be expected at the top of the graceful stairway. How beautiful the great drawing-room was, with its satin-wood walls, carved and bracketed for silk-covered shades. How deep the great rugs were in all the big down-stairs rooms! And there were velvet couches on either side of the library fire, and here, before a glowing hearth, Miss Simpson gathered her girls of an afternoon for the function of tea. The maid who served the tea wore a cap. And on no account did she ever lift her eyes to smile, as Sophie smiled. What was most important, this maid referred to Miss Simpson as "Madam." And Phœbe knew this was most proper and desirable. For Sally had always called Mother "Madam." If Phœbe had not known about all this, Genevieve would have been the one to teach

her, Genevieve being a stickler for all that was proper and—fashionable.

Phœbe came to look upon the tea-function at Miss Simpson's as a rare privilege. This was because only a certain very small group of girls in town might share the opportunity of attending that daily function. For Miss Simpson's School, as Uncle John had said, and as had been borne out architecturally and otherwise—Miss Simpson's School was most exclusive.

Freed from long weeks of loneliness, Phœbe welcomed the School with delight. She felt it rightful that she should be there, too. For was not her Uncle John the most fashionable rector in town? Was not her Uncle Bob a Judge?—that he was Judge of the new Court for Juveniles subtracting only a little from the honors that were his. And was not her father, her dear, gallant, handsome father, a mining-engineer? And were not mining-engineers in the same class, socially, as doctors, and lawyers, and bankers, and mayors of the city? Genevieve said so.

So Phœbe, welcomed to the School by Miss Simpson, received into the exclusive tea circle before that library fire, and made one of a little "set" of

pupils out of well-to-do families—Phœbe began to feel at home in this small, new city, to fret less for the dear mother who was taking such a long time to get well, and to put behind her all thoughts of the something which she had not understood. In fact, Phœbe was coming to be almost patient, almost happy and contented once more.

And then, one morning, with the same suddenness that had found her free of restraint and bewildering conjectures, there came another change.

How it came she scarcely knew. Why it came, she had no idea. It was there—all about her—like the air; no, more like an obscuring smoke. She could not see what was wrong. But she could feel. Phœbe curtsied to Miss Simpson and that august principal did not smile. And there were other signs—signs that struck a chill to Phœbe's tender heart.

Phœbe did not ask any questions. New Year's Day had ended a wonderful life. This new life was baffling; full of cruel blows. "Submit," counseled a still, small voice; "submit, and wait for Mother."

The hot tears stung the gray-blue eyes. Phœbe

blinked them away, opened her Physical Geography, and smiled bravely at a picture of a chimpanzee climbing a cocoanut tree.

Phœbe smiled—but she awaited a new blow.

CHAPTER V

PHOEBE was very busy. With the wet half of an old handkerchief, she wiped off the top of her own desk most painstakingly; next, having dried it with the bit of worn linen kept in reserve, she cleared out the shelf of the desk, dusting each book as she did so, and then washed and dried the shelf. Last of all, she took out her inkwell, cleaned the lid of it, refilled it carefully from a nearby bottle, and replaced it without the loss of a purple drop. All the while she hummed a little, and was so intent upon her work that she seemed not to know that the other girls were leaving one by one—until no one was left with her in the high room, which once had been a music-room, save a teacher, seated quietly at her desk.

But Phoebe, despite all her earnest washing-up, had only been killing time. She had not glanced up from her work because she did not care to meet the eyes, or note the whispers, of the other girls. She would not pass out with them across the ter-

race which fronted the big house for fear they might not walk with her, or call a pleasant good-bye. She was waiting, busy meanwhile, until she could leave Miss Simpson's alone.

The teacher, setting her own desk to rights, cast an inquiring look at Phœbe every now and then. When the last fellow-pupil was gone, Phœbe rose and came forward to the platform, a little timidly. In front of the big desk, she halted. Her cheeks were pink—too pink. Her lips were pressed together. But her eyes smiled bravely. Back went one brown shoe, and the slender, stockinged legs bent in a curtsy.

"Good-night, Miss Fletcher," said Phœbe, politely.

"Good-night, dear." Miss Fletcher's voice was curiously husky. And as Phœbe turned to leave, the teacher rose abruptly, banged a ruler upon the green slope of oil-clothed board in front of her, opened and shut a drawer noisily, and dabbed at her eyes alternately with the back of a hand.

But Phœbe was going cheerily enough. She said her usual good-afternoon to the black-clad, white-aproned maid at the front door, did a hop-skip across the patterned bricks of the wide terrace, and

went trippingly down the winding steps that led to the gate and the street.

A limousine was waiting there—a long, gleaming, tawny vehicle with brown trimmings. Phoebe recognized the motor. It was Genevieve Finnegan's, and it called for Genevieve every school afternoon. Phoebe had seen other cars of the same color flashing hither and thither through the town. The Finnegans, it was rumored, had five automobiles in their big garage. And Genevieve had been heard to say, though it was scarcely believable, that of the five cars one was kept solely for the use of the Finnegan servants! Servants! And Uncle John still clinging to a surrey and a horse with no check-rein and a long tail!

As Phoebe sped down the last half-dozen steps to the sidewalk, she did not even raise her eyes to the proud countenance of the smartly liveried Finnegan chauffeur. All day she had been troubled, knowing herself covertly discussed, and slyly ignored. Now, of a sudden, at sight of this huge testimony to many dollars and much power, she felt strangely helpless, alone, poor, and ashamed.

Her unwonted attention to her desk had made her a quarter of an hour late. She knew that Uncle

John and Grandma were, even now, keeping an eye on the clock, or peering out of a window to see whether or not she was coming through the drive-way gate. She hurried along, eyes straight ahead.

As she walked, her lips moved. Over and over, she was repeating certain things that she had heard the girls say that day—and certain things that she had said in reply. For instance, Olive Hayward had spoken of the graduation exercises, to be held early in June. And when Phœbe had interposed, but very meekly, to inquire what part the younger pupils would take, Olive, who was fully as round, Phœbe decided, as Uncle Bob himself—Olive had said, with a queer glance at the girls grouped with her, “Oh, do you think you’ll still be here?” “I think I will,” Phœbe had answered, and the girls had laughed!

Why?

And then there were other things. Phœbe revolved around the end of the home gate, closed it even as she started up the walk, bumped in surprise against the new screen door put up that day against winged intruders, sped along the hall, taking off the serge coat as she went, and entered the liv-

ing-room, breathless, casting aside her hat with one hand and her coat with the other. She seized the squat stool upon which Uncle Bob, when reading, liked to rest his feet, carried it to a high, old mirror that had, in its time, reflected Grandma in her bridal gown, and stood upon it.

"Well, young lady?" It was Uncle Bob, from the far corner where was the telephone.

Phœbe was turning herself before the mirror—now this way, now that. "Excuse me, please," she begged; "just a minute—something—I must see—right away—very important—before I change."

"I should say!" agreed her uncle, watching her curiously. "What seems to be the matter?"

She came about to face him. Her brows were knit. Her eyes were troubled. "That's just what—what I don't know," she admitted. "My dress is all right.—*Is* there anything wrong with my dress?"

He got up and crossed to her. His underlip was thrust out, as if he were angry. But he answered lightly enough. "Wrong? Not unless mine eyes deceive me."

Phœbe was turning again more slowly. "I thought maybe my petticoat was showing."

"Not a sign of it."

"But, Uncle Bob——!"

"Yes? What?"

"Get right behind me,—straight behind."

"Here I am."

"Oh, Uncle Bob, is there a hole in my stocking?"

He looked—now at one slim leg, now at the other. "There certainly is not."

She got down, her eyes solemn. "Uncle Bob," she confided, "I don't know what to make of it. But all today, at school, the girls have stared, and stared, and—and whispered. I was sure something was wrong—with my hair, or my dress. And they were too—too polite to tell."

"Polite, you call 'em!" And Phœbe noted how Uncle Bob's chest rose, so that the front edges of his coat drew apart. Just over the top of his collar, too, his neck grew scarlet. "Staring and whispering! The ill-bred chits!"

But Phœbe was not angry—only puzzled. "It's—it's another mystery," she said, almost under her breath.

"Say!"—her Uncle came to stand beside her, and he, too, lowered his voice—"do you know, I don't believe I like that Simpson School! Suppose we just cut it out?"

The light in her eager eyes answered him. She had been wondering just how she could go on at Miss Simpson's, with the girls acting so queerly, and not asking her to walk home with them, or sit with them under the school arbor during the morning study-hour. "You mean, Uncle Bob," she breathed incredulously, "that I won't have to go to Miss Simpson's any more?"

"Well, something on that order." The Judge smiled a wide, tooth-revealing smile.

But his news was too good to be true. "Has Daddy said so?" she wanted to know.

"He hasn't, but I've a strong idea that he will."

"Oh, I'm glad!" She took a deep breath. "Because, Uncle Bob, I've felt—well, so queer at school for several days. You know—uneasy."

He nodded. "I know." And more confidentially, leaning down to say it, "I've heard of other girls—oh, extra fine girls—who felt exactly like you do about Miss Simpson's."

But Phœbe was scarcely listening. A new plan—a wonderful, heart-stirring plan—had come to her, following on the thought that now her days were again free. "Oh, Uncle Bob," she began, "if I don't

have to go to school again, maybe Daddy will let me go West! To Mother!"

Her uncle backed a step; his look lifted to the wall behind her. He slapped one plump hand with the other, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Mm—er—yes," he observed; then turning away, "I'm afraid we haven't made things very lively for you here."

"It isn't that," she protested. "I've had Daddy. And I love to be here with all of you. You're all so nice to each other—never cross. But—but, Uncle Bob, I'm beginning to—to miss my Mother." Her look beseeched him.

He sat down, holding out his hands to her, and she came to stand at his knee. "If you have to stay a little longer with us," he said gently, "you can be out-doors every one of these sunny Spring days, and you can plant a garden. And when it rains, well, this isn't a little, tucked-up New York apartment—this big house."

She looked around, nodding. "It's terribly big," she declared. "So many rooms, and so far up to the ceiling. At first I almost got lost—you remember? To go anywhere, you have to travel so much."

Uncle Bob laughed, and drew her to him. "You

blessed!" he said. "Of course it's big. Why, there's room enough here to swing a cat."

"Yes," agreed Phœbe, "but I don't want to swing a cat."

"I mean"—Uncle Bob was shaking precisely like the more substantial portion of a floating-island pudding!—"that you can stretch yourself."

"No." Phœbe shook her head with decision. "No, Uncle John doesn't like me to stretch. He says, 'Ladies don't do it.'"

"Oh, you funny little tyke!" cried Uncle Bob. "Can't you run, and romp, and play?"

"In here?" she asked, swinging an arm.

"Yes, dumpling!"

"No," answered Phœbe, as certain as before. "I'd bother Uncle John when he's writing a sermon. So Saturdays, when I'm here, I just stand at a window if I can't play out in the yard. I just stand and look out. But I can't see much—even upstairs. Because this house is so awfully low down, next the ground."

"Low down!" ejaculated her uncle, amazed.

"Yes. In New York, our apartment was 'way high up in the building, and we could look over the tops of houses to the River. And the other di-

rection, oh, there was a wonderful moving-picture theatre, and——” She stopped, suddenly remembering.

But her Uncle Bob smiled at her kindly. “And what about that theatre?”

“I went lots of evenings, before Mother was so sick—just Mother and I went, or Sally took me. My! but I love the movies!” Then, fearing he might misjudge her, “I loved the nights we stayed at home, too. They were so cosy. Daddy would be gone, or busy, or just downtown. So Mother would sit at the window in her room, in a big chair, and I’d sit on her knees. Of course, my legs are long, and they hung over. So we just put a stool close by to hold up my feet, and then—then Mother would sing to me.” Her lips trembled.

“Darling!” said Uncle Bob, tenderly. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling through them bravely at this uncle who seemed always to understand her. Whereupon he smiled, too, and kissed her. “Maybe Grandma can hold you like that, in a big chair, sometimes.”

“I’m afraid she isn’t strong enough,” answered Phœbe. “And then, maybe she wouldn’t know just how to sing.”

"I see." He pondered the problem a moment. "Well, of course, I can hold you. But about the singing—just what was it that Mother sang?"

"Oh, she just made it up as she went along—to suit the occasion."

He put his arms about her then, and held her close. And there was a long pause.

Her eyes were brimming. And presently, with a long sigh, she spoke again: "Oh, how I like my mother to hold me!"—it was scarcely more than a whisper. "I like her arms, and the place just here on her shoulder." The coat under her cheek was checked. She touched a black square with a finger. "And she uses perfumery on her hair. Oh, Uncle Bob, I love her hair! I—I love my mother!"

She wept then, without restraint. And the Judge, awkwardly, and puffing not a little with the effort, gathered her up in his arms and held her, whispering to her, straining the little figure to his breast.

"I can't say anything to Daddy," she sobbed. "Oh, Uncle Bob! Uncle Bob!"

He patted her shoulder. He laid a big cheek against her wet, baby-soft face. He rocked her gently, yearning over her with all the fatherliness

of his big heart. How many times, as Grandma told her, had tearful little ones cried out to him where he sat in his lofty chambers at the Court House! How often had his tender sympathy wrapped them about like a robe—the mistreated, the lonely, the children that lacked love! But here, calling upon him for help in her suffering, was one dearer than all others, of his own blood. And what would he do to help her?

“When can I see Mother?” she asked. “When?”

“Give us all time,” he pleaded. “I know how it is, but try to bear it—try to wait. It’ll all come out right somehow—it’s got to, Phœbe. Oh, it’s got to!”

She felt that he understood, that he grieved with her, that her heartache was his own.

CHAPTER VI

THE blow she awaited fell—twenty-four hours later.

Phoebe spent much of that twenty-four hours in conjectures. And the final and pathetic conclusion to which she came was that she had done something wrong, something "awful bad," though what it was she could not guess. But whatever it was, it was so terrible that the girls at Miss Simpson's had turned against her.

And what about Miss Simpson herself? Phoebe understood that Miss Simpson was a personage in the community. Though her school was not the only one of its kind in the place, it was the only one that counted. To be, or not to be, a "Simpson girl" meant, on the one hand, membership in that exclusive very young crowd; on the other, almost complete ostracism from it. Miss Simpson had in her hands (everybody knew it) the social future of the town's growing girls.

Phoebe's cry over, Uncle Bob had gone to join

his two brothers in the library. A conference began there, Phœbe felt sure; she was certain, too, that she was the subject of it. As she paused at the foot of the stairs—this just outside the library door—she heard Grandma's voice, too. Grandma was weeping!

Phœbe went up to her room. She stole up, on tip-toe, guiltily. Her brows were puckered, her eyes wide, her lips pursed. She forbore to steady herself by a hand on the banisters, lest they creak.

As she went, she made a resolve. It had to do with Sophie. In a way, of course, Sophie could not be trusted. For though on occasions Sophie seemed to belong on Phœbe's side—in a dividing of the household which existed only in Phœbe's mind—at other times the maid swung over to the clique of grown-ups, and Phœbe was left, as it were, on the defence, alone. Yet Phœbe had discovered that now and again it was possible to get information from Sophie. Phœbe's resolve was to "pump" Sophie.

Arrived in her room, she gave herself up, a second time, to a close scrutiny of herself in the glass. First, she looked at her clothes, feeling that, after all, there was some fault in them (and Uncle Bob,

though a Judge, was only a man, after all, and could not competently pass on the matter of a girl's dress). Having satisfied herself that there was nothing glaringly faulty in her dress, Phœbe took her hand-mirror and went to a window; and seating herself, examined her face, hair and throat—critically, unsparingly.

Once she had asked her mother if she was pretty. And Mother—herself so beautiful!—had answered, with a kiss, "Of course *I* think so." But now, Phœbe asked herself, was this quota of hair, features and slender neck considered attractive in the eyes of those who did not love her?

Every freckle and flaw stood out alarmingly in the afternoon light. Phœbe concluded that in point of good looks she brought nothing to Miss Simpson's School. And as she had no money, like Genevieve Finnegan——

She put down the mirror and went to the closet. In the daytime, she was never afraid to open the door of the closet. That nameless, terrifying Thing which made the place dreaded at night, went higher, after sun-up, so Phœbe believed, to lurk in the cave-like storage places that, sloping of roof, opened off the attic.

She had not many dresses in the closet. She touched each in turn. Then she stood for a few minutes on the threshold of the closet to get a general and comprehensive idea of her little wardrobe. After which, hunting her old doll, she went back to the window to think.

Grandma, weeping—that seemed, to her, the thing most significant. Why was Grandma weeping? “No,” said Phœbe, solemnly, to the doll, “it isn’t my face, and it isn’t my clothes.” For, after all, when it came to looks, Phœbe felt herself to be better looking than, say, Genevieve. And there were two or three other girls at Miss Simpson’s who were, if proud, quite plain. As for clothes, Grandma had no need to feel badly about them; all she had to do was order more!

It was, indeed, a mystery. Phœbe tried to remember any story that resembled hers among all the moving pictures she had ever seen. She could remember a little girl who stole jam, and another little girl who stole watermelons. But she had taken nothing, had done no wrong wilfully. At that, the tears of self-pity flowed. She hid her face against the doll.

Then—of a sudden—she felt she knew! Pray-

ers! That was it! The girls had discovered, somehow, that Phœbe had only recently learned to pray! She stood up, dropping the doll to the floor.

Mother had never taught her to pray. And once when Phœbe had asked about prayers (having seen two children kneeling beside their father's chair in a moving picture), Mother had answered, rather sharply, "I don't believe in teaching innocent little tots that they're full of sin. It's wicked." But Grandma—when she found that Phœbe did not know "Now I lay me"—Grandma had knelt down beside Phœbe (they were in Phœbe's room) and implored God to touch Phœbe's heart, and claim Phœbe's love. And a day or two later, Uncle John had called Phœbe into the library, where Phœbe had learned "Now I lay me," and the Lord's Prayer, and had listened to a very great deal that Uncle John said, the sum and substance of which was that Phœbe's ignorance in the matter of prayers was so shocking as to be beyond even Uncle John's power to express. Phœbe gathered further, though her uncle was discreet when it came to naming anyone who should be blamed, that Mother, yes, and Daddy, were equally culpable, and that Phœbe had virtually been snatched from the burning.

So—Phœbe decided—it was the prayers. True, she had prayed faithfully for the past two or three months. But the girls had discovered about the unlucky thirteen years and more that went before!

Something pounded in Phœbe's throat. And there by the window, one knee on the forgotten doll, she bowed herself. . . .

Later, when she went down to supper, she felt more certain than ever that she was right. It was the prayers! For as she entered the dining-room, guiltily, wistfully, on slow foot, and with lowered look, nobody greeted her cheerily. Her father kissed her, but absent-mindedly. He ate without speaking. Uncle John was silent, too—and stern. Uncle Bob made one or two pathetic attempts to start conversation, but Phœbe could see that even jolly Uncle Bob——! And Grandma, pressing dainties upon Phœbe, and smiling tenderly (with swollen eyes), was plainly anxious and disturbed.

So was Sophie! True, she winked at Phœbe once during the course of the meal. But it was a solemn wink. Her manner was subdued. She moved carefully, rattling no dishes. Phœbe caught the girl's eyes upon her more than once. Phœbe

understood the look—it was all examination, and curiosity.

“Can Sophie take me upstairs?” asked Phœbe, at bedtime. The uncles were back in the library once more, and Phœbe’s father was with them. But there was no sound of argument.

“Are you—lonesome?” returned Grandma. And her head shook very much.

“I’d like to have Sophie go up with me,” Phœbe answered.

But when she and Sophie were upstairs, alone, and the latter had finished her pillow-beating, Phœbe asked no questions. She feared to; and she knew that Sophie would not go without some word, some hint.

It came. “Miss Simpson was in to see your Grammaw this afternoon,”—this casually, with a quick look; then, “Did you know it?”

Phœbe was equally adroit. “She was?” she asked indifferently.

“Yop. I don’t like that woman.”

Sophie went. And Phœbe, left behind in the dark, lay thinking. Miss Simpson had called! Uncle Bob had not mentioned it. Why? And why had Miss Simpson called? What had she told or

asked? Phœbe knew that it was this visit which had made Uncle Bob decide against Phœbe's continuing at the school.

If the five grown men and women in the big rooms below could have known how grievously Phœbe's ignorance of any part of the real truth was torturing the child, then each, and all, would have hastened up the stairs to that little figure, turning and tossing, as the bewildered brain strove to arrive at facts. For though the facts were bad enough, Phœbe's guesses were far more terrible. She did not pray, or weep. She lay and planned how she would run away—to Mother.

But she was quite herself in the morning. When she awoke, the sight of branches against her windows—lovely, green, tree-top branches, of sunlight streaming in, the songs of birds coming faintly, and loud cock-crows, all these drove away magically the fear and ache and loneliness of the night.

She remembered that she did not have to go to school—and was glad! Why, it was quite like a Saturday! Freedom, no sermons, no admonitions to be quiet of foot and voice! And had she not heard about some little new ducks that were about to hatch?

She sprang up. She kissed her mother's photograph with a smiling kiss. She sang over her dressing. She showed a sunny face at the breakfast-table, where Uncle John ate silently, and Uncle Bob sat behind his paper. The night before, what a sense of guilt was hers! It was gone. Her good-morning was merry. She winked back saucily at Sophie's wink, and ate her oatmeal with good appetite. Grief and fourteen, how short was their stay together! For she was entirely overlooking the fact that this was the day she was intending to run away!

"And what's my little daughter figuring on doing this morning?" her father asked; "—lucky Phœbe, who doesn't have to be shut up in school!"

Phœbe thought perhaps the ducks were hatched by now.

"Hatched and swimming in Uncle Bob's pool," announced Grandma. "And the poor mother-hen is so worried——!"

At that, Uncle Bob came out from behind his paper—came out like the sun from behind a cloud. And he had another cup of coffee, and threw a violet across the table to Phœbe, and pretended to be shocked at the conduct of the ducks. So that

Phœbe laughed, and Grandma and Daddy smiled—yes, even Uncle John smiled. Breakfast was cheerful.

Gray eyes thoughtful, Phœbe fell to contrasting it with breakfasts in New York; the contrast was the sharper when each of Grandma's three sons pushed back his chair in turn and gave his mother a hearty kiss. What a lot of kissing went on at Uncle Bob's! Everyone kissed Grandma good-morning and good-night. In New York, Daddy kissed Phœbe, and Mother kissed Phœbe: each other they did not kiss.

Phœbe thought of this again later in the day, when Genevieve came. For it was Genevieve who delivered the blow!

CHAPTER VII

GENEVIEVE was Phœbe's own age, but stockily built, with an up-turning Irish nose, reddish corkscrew curls, and freckles. She had a proud, conscious mouth, and her teeth were large. Her eyes were almost as red as her hair, and small. Around them the skin crinkled up when she laughed, shutting them away completely. When she had something important to say, she had a trick of throwing her head back with a toss of the curls. Phoebe had noted the trick. Once or twice she had even practiced it in front of her mirror!

Genevieve was more overdressed than usual for her call on Phœbe. She had a well wrapped package under one arm, and she wasted no time in delivering it.

"I've brought back your books," she explained, and proffered the package.

Phœbe stared. "My books?"

"From Miss Simpson's." Genevieve laid them

on the sitting-room table and sat, arranging her skirt grandly.

Phœbe still stared. It was as if she had unexpectedly been struck. Of course, if she was not to continue at the school—— And yet to have her books sent after her——!

"When my motor called for me," went on Genevieve, "I had my chauffeur put them in the car,"—this with a graceful wave of the hand toward the package. "'It's no trouble,' I said to Miss Simpson, 'as long as I have my own motor, and my chauffeur.' And Miss Simpson said, 'Thank you, my dear. Then Phœbe won't have to come back'."

Phœbe's slender body stiffened. "*She* said I won't have to?" she demanded. "You mean my Uncle Bob said it." Then as Genevieve's brows and shoulders lifted simultaneously, "Oh, Genevieve, all the girls have acted so funny. What's the matter? Do you know?"

Genevieve smoothed the crisp folds of her taffeta dress. "I'd rather not say," she declared, importantly evasive.

But Phœbe was not to be put off. "Oh, please, Genevieve!" she entreated, "Tell me! Have I done anything?"

"N-n-n-no." Then, raising her eyes to Phœbe's anxious face, "You—you haven't heard anything?"

Phœbe shook her head. "Is it because we haven't got an automobile?" she ventured; "only a horse and a surrey?"

The reddish eyes disappeared as Genevieve laughed—musically, in the most approved Simpson manner. "Oh, several of the girls at the School are awfully poor," she reminded. "I let them ride in my car. But"—significantly—"they have fine standing, Miss Simpson says. And they've never had any scandal."

Vaguely Phœbe caught the inference. "Oh, yes; scandal," she said, almost under her breath. "That would be awful."

Genevieve reached to touch Phœbe's arm condescendingly. "Don't you care," she counseled, "because I like you just the same."

Phœbe fell back. Her face paled; her heart pounded. Scandal! and she was on the verge of knowing just what was meant. She thought of the prayers. She longed to know the worse. "Genevieve," she whispered, "have I—what scandal?"

"It's funny you don't know," marveled Genevieve,

"Oh, what is it? Please! *Please!*" Phœbe's lips were trembling.

Genevieve, having postponed her informing to her own complete satisfaction, now saw that the moment was ripe for her climax. "Phœbe," she began solemnly, "Miss Simpson doesn't want you at our school because your mother's in Reno."

"Reno?" repeated Phœbe. Her face lighted joyously. Mother was in Reno! And if she were to carry out that plan to run away——! And after all, it was not the prayers!

"Nevada," added Genevieve, with finality. The other's relief irritated.

It was Phœbe's turn to toss her head. "Nevada is good for my mother's cough," she declared.

"Yes?" said Genevieve. "Well, everybody says your mother's gone West—hm!—for another reason."

"She's sick," returned Phœbe, quietly. "And it's smart—Mother said so—to go to Florida or West when you're sick."

Once more Genevieve shrugged. "Of course, you ought to know about your own mother. But anyhow there was something in the papers—the

New York papers. It was a printed telegram from Nevada."

"Certainly there was," Phœbe agreed. "Because my mother's a New Yorker, and so the newspapers print that she's out there. They'd be sure to. She's so beautiful."

Genevieve rose abruptly. "Oh, all right!" she retorted. "But beautiful or not, all the same you can't blame Miss Simpson. She doesn't want a girl in her school that's got a mother that's divorced."

"Di-vorced!"

Genevieve's eyes shone. It was the effect she wanted. She moved toward the door. "Well, I must be going," she announced.

Phœbe led the way. In the hall, she turned up the stairs without even a glance toward her departing visitor. Her throat ached. There was a sinking feeling under the high, wide belt of her gingham dress. She longed for the seclusion of her room—*no*, for the darkness of the clothes-closet. She gained it, going unsteadily. She closed the door. Then she sank beside the suit-case and laid her head upon it.

Divorce! She knew what that meant. Over and over she had seen it all in the "movies". Her

father would no longer be married to her mother: The two might not live in the same house: Her mother would not even dare to come to Grandma's!

Something seemed to seize her then, to press upon her from all sides, to crush and smother her. With head lowered, and face down, the blood came charging up her throat, so that she went dizzy, and felt nauseated. A chill shook her as she lay. She thought of death, and prayed for it.

"If I died, they'd both be sorry," she told herself, "and maybe then they wouldn't be divorced."

Next, overwhelmingly, came a longing to see her mother. "I'll go," she determined.

She sat up. And in the dark of the closet, with the door shut, and as noiselessly as possible, she packed the suit-case.

CHAPTER VIII

THE suit-case packed, Phœbe sat down upon it—to think. She had known even as she took down and folded her dresses that she could not really run away. But the packing had served as a physical relief to her mental anguish. Also, she had hoped in her secret heart that she might be discovered at her packing!—discovered and comforted; more: the ready suit-case, the threatened departure by night, alone, might bring her father and her uncles to believe that the wisest thing they could do would be to send her to her mother. Oh, how she longed for her mother!

The tears came then, and she wept, her head bowed upon her knees. Divorce! Never again the dear apartment with mother and Daddy—the beloved home-nest, with its ivory woodwork and rose hangings, its perfumed warmth, and beauty and cosiness. Her mother and father were to be forever apart—forever!

Sorrow broke over her like a wave. "Forever!"

she wept. "Forever!" There was something almost delicious about the very force and keenness of her grief. She was going through a crisis such as she had seen pictured upon the screen. And the very word Forever augmented her suffering and that sense of curious gratification in the undergoing of such agony.

So again and again she went back over the cause of her weeping. Divorce! They were to be separated during all the coming years, those two whom she loved so dearly. Never again might she have them together, with her, one at each hand. Always now there would be the pain of having Mother gone if she, Phœbe, was with Daddy; of having Daddy gone if she was with Mother. Always it would be like that—like now.

And then her resentment rose against those two loved ones. "Oh, what's the matter with them! What's the matter with them!" she burst out. That father who seemed so gallant and fine—how could her mother bear to be away from him? And Mother, beautiful, sweet, altogether adorable—what more did her father ask? They were through with each other! Oh, why? And then, melting

once more, Oh, how could she bear it! Oh, Mother! Mother!—Oh, dear Daddy!

Next, of a sudden, a more terrible thought: Would the divorce of her parents mean that she might not be allowed to see her mother again?

The very possibility brought her to her feet and out of the closet. "No! I won't stand it!" she cried. "I must have Mother! I won't stay here! I won't! I won't!"

She was immediately all resolution. She washed her face. Then she took off the dress she was wearing—her grandmother had bought it—and opening the suit-case, chose and put on a dress of her mother's buying. Thus fortified, as it were, in something that had been touched by hands dear beyond expression, she descended to the library. She hoped all the grown-ups would be there on her arrival. She longed to announce defiantly her plan to leave.

But—only Uncle John was in the room, leaned, as always, over his papers and his great flat-topped table. He did not speak; did not even look up—as Phœbe advanced to a stand before the large map of the United States which hung above the book-cases at one side of the room.

Ah, what a great distance lay between! Here, a small dot and small letters showed the position of the town where she was; there, a larger dot and larger letters marked the spot where Mother had gone.

Standing before the map, with face raised, once more anger possessed her—a fierce anger—against this town in which she was, against everyone in it. There had been a time when she had fretted because she could not go about like other girls, and meet people; now she felt she did not want to go anywhere, did not want to meet anyone, know anyone, make any friends!

They did not like her mother? They talked against her mother? Very well. They need not like her, either. They could talk against her if they wanted to!

Her resentment demanded action. There was a drug-store down the street, two blocks away. To reach it from the Blair front gate, one had to pass a dozen houses. There were always people on the porches of those houses, or on the lawns. Phœbe went upstairs for her New York hat, and for her purse. There was ice-cream soda to be had at the drug-store, and sundaes of every description.

Phoebe liked them. But they were not, just then, first in her thoughts. Did Genevieve Finnegan, and others like her, expect Phœbe Shaw Blair to hide herself away in Grandma's big house? To weep alone at slights? "From such small-town people?" raged Phœbe, as she slammed the front door. Did they think she would act as if she were ashamed of her mother?

Her hat on the back of her head, her head in the air, Phœbe let herself out of the front gate and started for the drug-store. And on the way, she passed every one of those dozen houses without so much as a glance!

It was a pleasure to do that. She arrived at the drug-store in great good humor. She felt that she had done something for Mother!

She was in a reckless mood. She enjoyed one soda and two ice-creams. She ignored the pretty young woman who waited upon her. When she started homeward, she went with a light step and a high chin. She wished she had a dog to lead. Not that she cared for dogs—she was afraid of them. But if she were leading a dog, he would be an excuse for running, and calling out happily. That was what she most wished to do—call out

happily, and skip—just to show all those gaping neighbors how little she cared!

She compromised on a rubber ball. It was an inspiration! The moment she stepped upon the front porch, here was Uncle Bob, dragging the lawn-mower behind him. She explained that she had spent every cent she had at the drug-store. At any other time she would have hesitated to confess that even to Uncle Bob. But now she was suddenly indifferent even about what he thought.

And Uncle Bob, seeing her cheeks so pink and her eyes so full of fire, dropped the handle of the lawn-mower as if it were red-hot, and emptied one pocket of its silver. "God bless me!" he cried. "A rubber ball's a great idea! And if you see anything else you like——"

Phœbe took the silver and was off like a shot. She knew the store that carried toys. She went without a pause to the toy-counter. There were other things that she liked,—as Uncle Bob had suggested—plenty of them. But for them she had no time. She bought the ball,—a large, gun-metal affair with a ridge around it like an Equator. She paid for it with a proud air, not even deigning to look at the clerk. No, she did not care to have it

wrapped. And even while the man was sending away to make change for the half dollar she had given him, she proceeded to bounce the ball.

She bounced it all the way home, not taking her eyes from it. She ran; she skipped. For her purpose, the ball was precisely as good as the best dog would have been. As she played, she knew people were passing her on the sidewalk; or from porch or lawn were watching her pass. But she was completely absorbed.

After that, every day for many days she went at least once to the drug-store. And she bounced the ball both ways!

CHAPTER IX

Now came the beginning of what was like a new era of life for Phœbe—an era in which, more keenly than ever before, she was to understand, and—to suffer. Up to now she had not by any means been indifferent to the things that touched her own existence. And how she had loved and hated, joyed and sorrowed, with her enthralling favorites of the screen! But the time was come when she was to awaken to depths and heights of feeling—depths and heights all the more strikingly contrasted because her imagination was film-trained; she was to regard herself as the central figure in a heart drama that seemed countless reels long.

And about her, who—with her mother away—who was to take counsel with her, to sympathize, even to guess one small part of all that which surged through her young heart?

It was the great pipe-organ in Uncle John's church that had most to do with her sudden emotional awakening, with her realization that some-

thing really momentous had come into her life. Weeks before she had started to school at Miss Simpson's, the church organ had moved her. In New York, at one of the great temples dedicated to moving-pictures, she had often listened to the boom of just such a glorious instrument—listened with calm interest and pleasure, her hand clasped lovingly in her mother's. And the church organ had not failed to recall to her the theatre, and those sweet hours that, alas, she had never fully appreciated.

But the first Sunday following Geneviève Finnegan's visit! The pipe-organ stirred her cruelly. It spoke her own tragedy—it told the story of her broken, bankrupt home.

She had gone to church meaning to sit up proudly in the Blair pew, to keep her chin high, and her lips smiling; to stand and sit and kneel with the greatest poise, so that those who cared to look would see!—particularly those who might be sitting directly behind her. But when the organ broke forth, filling the high, dim spaces, there swept over her a realization of the sadness and the finality of the ending of that New York life which had been so

sweetly happy. And the young head drooped, the lashes glistened, the lips trembled pitifully.

Standing, she kept her look lowered. Kneeling, she prayed—but not “Oh, dear God” (as Uncle John had taught her); instinctively her silent prayer was addressed to her mother. “Oh, darling, darling!” she implored, her forehead against the backs of her small gloved hands. With inward sight she beheld the loved features, the yearned for arms, the comforting breast.

Then—remorse. Behind the adored figure, what was that other? The Christ? Yes. She had seen Him once. It was in a war picture. A soldier was dying, alone, in No Man’s Land. And suddenly, there by the side of the dying had appeared the One whose look of love and compassion had brought a smile to the face of the prostrate boy. She must not pray to her mother. She must pray to Him. “Oh, dear Jesus,” she plead, “give me back my mother! Oh, please give me my mother!”

Grandma, shifting upon her old knees, came nearer to Phœbe by a hand’s breadth. Grandma’s dress, of wool, and black, with pipings of gros-grain, had been made for her two years before. Faintly it smelled of moth-balls.

Phœbe shrank away.

That morning Uncle John's sermon failed to bore her as usual. She had her thoughts. Only at first were they miserably unhappy. As Uncle John progressed, she fell to thinking of a plan: it had to do with her return to New York. The dear apartment was still there, even if Mother was West. Perhaps—undoubtedly!—Sally was still on hand, black and bland, devoted as ever, and full of her accustomed gaiety. Why should Phœbe stay in a town that treated her unkindly and gossiped about her mother? Why not go back to New York, the dear home, the fond servant and the enchanting "movies"?

But how could it be managed? She determined to ask her father.

"I will go! I will go! I will!" she promised herself. "I won't stay here! I hate it! I hate it!"

She went out of the church with a face so pale that the blue veins stood forth on her white skin like tracings of ink. She remembered how screen actresses bore themselves when they were suffering—how wistful was their expression, how far-away was the look in their beautiful eyes. Phœbe

bore herself like them, walking slowly, with uplifted countenance. And her pain was real.

In a way, Uncle Bob and her father spoiled the beauty of her keen pain. Arriving home, she found them on the sunny side of the house, tinkering with fish-lines. Her father had a can of worms, and he was adding to them by turning back the winter banking of sod from the clapboards. They welcomed her joyously, and coaxed little shrieks from her by holding out the worm-can. She changed her dress, and spent the long afternoon at her father's heels. The paleness left her face. She consented to carry the worms, and a shoe-box filled with sandwiches.

But night brought back something of the sweet grief of the morning. Her father held her for an hour after supper, seated in a big chair by the sitting-room hearth. Her cheek against his breast, she longed to talk to him of her mother—of the plan that had occurred to her that morning; yet she dared not. He was not like Uncle Bob, plump and smiling and full of invitations to confidences: he was so quiet, and thoughtful, so sombre-eyed, even mysterious. She felt his mysteriousness most when she looked at his tight-closed lips, his set

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jaws. And she asked herself, Was he grieving as she was grieving, and was it about Mother?

She sat up in bed that night and read "St. Elmo", thrilling over the portions that were full of expressions of love. For her heart was hungry for affection. When had she lacked protestations of it, with Mother near? And Sally had never failed to tell her that she was dear. Her father was not demonstrative—never had been. And now all these others! With the single exception of Uncle Bob did they ever say kind and tender things?

When her light was out, she lay thinking of "St. Elmo" and of moving-pictures in which children, or young and beautiful heroines, had been held dear beyond words. She repeated lines from the screen that seemed very sweet to her—one in particular: *"Across the world he went, seeking her."*

She felt her life a failure—her fate unspeakably sad. She wept, her head in her arms. All sorts of pictures flashed themselves upon her brain. And she repeated certain Biblical lines and passages that she had heard of late, both at home and at Miss Simpson's. Somehow just to say them over exalted her strangely. One was, "Whither

thou goest I will go"; another, "He that watcheth over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps."

She slept at last, the tears on her cheeks. The pipe-organ had done it all—that and the slowly advancing vested choir. It had even made her forget, temporarily, her childish fear of the dark. For that particular Sunday night was the first night that she had ever gone to sleep without looking under the bed and into the clothes-closet.

The next morning, waking late, she wanted to stay where she was, with the shades drawn, and read "St. Elmo", and think of sad things, and say beautiful lines, and enjoy more hours of sweet unhappiness. But voices called to her from below—Sophie's, her father's, Uncle Bob's. She kissed her mother's picture over and over while putting on her shoes and her dress, and combing her hair. When she went down to breakfast she was curiously unable to eat.

Doubtless one of the household's grown-ups, or, perhaps, all of them, saw that something was wrong, for that morning, promptly on the stroke of nine, Phœbe had her first lesson at home. It was Uncle John who acted as tutor. He had her read to him, choosing "The Vicar of Wakefield". As she went

along, haltingly, he asked her the meaning of words, and had her shut the book on her forefinger while she spelled them. He gave her several sums to do, also, using the arithmetic that Genevieve Finnegan had brought home from Miss Simpson's; and they spent an hour over the globe, revolving it, and hunting countries and oceans and mountain-chains. Phœbe knew far more about the world, and what it looked like, here and there, and its peoples, and animals, than she dared to admit to Uncle John. She knew because she had seen so many "travel pictures".

That afternoon she spent in the vegetable garden with Sophie. The garden was at a far corner of the Blair grounds, well away from any house. And Phœbe saw that here was an opportunity to ask Sophie a few questions—the questions she shrank from asking anyone else.

"I know why Miss Simpson didn't want me at school any more," she said, by way of a beginning.

Sophie was pulling radishes. "Do y'?" she inquired. "Wasn't it—er—because your father wasn't payin' her enough money?"

"You know it wasn't," declared Phœbe, bluntly.

"You know she wanted me out because my mother is West, getting a divorce from my father."

"My land!" marveled Sophie, sitting back and staring up. "How'd you ever guess?—Phœbe, you been listenin'!"

"Genevieve Finnegan," said Phœbe, laconically.

"Oh, that little imp!"

"*You* knew all the time?"

Sophie went back to her garnering. "Oh, yes," she admitted proudly. "I showed Miss Royal Highness Simpson in. And your Uncle John, he tried to bluff her—told her your mamma wasn't well, and so forth. But she didn't bluff."

"She knew," put in Phœbe, "because there was a piece in a New York paper."

"Right y' are! Well, she didn't want talk in her school, she said; didn't want *her* little girls, the angels, to even know there was such a thing as divorce in the whole world!"

"It's in the movies," reminded Phœbe. "The girls all know."

"Course they do! And when she had somethin' to say to the Judge, you betcha *he* told her what's what!"

"Good for Uncle Bob!"

"He says to her, 'Miss Simpson, Phœbe will not remain at your precious school'. And I showed her out the front door,"—this with a flourish of her arms, both hands coming to rest on her hips while she gave a toss of the tousled head.

Phœbe touched Sophie on the shoulder. "Is—is divorce why my mother sent me here?" she asked.

"Phœbe, if I tell y' the truth——"

"But, then, maybe you don't know either," added Phœbe, adroitly, since she had learned that, with Sophie, the best method was to belittle Sophie's knowledge, and thus strike at her pride.

"Maybe I don't know!" cried Sophie, scornfully. "I guess I knew all about it before you ever showed up. Your paw brought you, young lady, without your mamma knowin' that he planned to. Now!"

"Sophie!" It was Phœbe's turn to sit back. She stared, aghast.

"Yes, ma'am. Your paw just naturally stole you."

"But Mother's telegram! It told me to come."

"Yes? Well, your paw sent you that telegram."

Phœbe did not speak for a minute. While things began to clear for her—the swift packing, the sudden departure from New York, the telegrams that

had come, one after another, the fact that she had had no letters, nor been permitted to read those written her father. Stolen! By her father, from her mother!

"Why?" demanded Phœbe, suddenly; then, as Sophie glanced up, "Why did Daddy steal me?"

"Didn't want you out there in a divorce town, I guess."

"Oh. And why was I watched so, and never taken anywhere for a long time?"

"If I tell y', you'll never, never tell?"

"Never, never, *never*—cross my heart to die!"

"The folks here was afraid your mamma'd steal you back."

Phœbe was appalled. She got up, and stood over Sophie, wavering a little, too shocked to speak.

"Phœbe!" comforted Sophie, reaching out her earth-stained hands. "Dear kiddie!"

"They—they don't want me to be with Mother?—again?"

Quickly Sophie averted her eyes. "I wouldn't say that," she declared. "Why, no! Y' see, it's this way: two of 'em here thinks the same about it, dearie. Your grammaw and the Judge thinks a little girl is always best off when she's with her

mother. I heard the Judge say so, and his maw agreed. But your Uncle John——”

Phœbe drew in a long, trembling breath. Then, “I hate him!” she declared. “Because he hates my mother.”

“You spoke the truth that time,” continued Sophie. “He married your mamma to Mister Jim, but he didn’t like her—never. Oh, he’s *all* on *your* paw’s side.”

“You mean that Daddy——?”

“Your daddy don’t say what he thinks,” reminded Sophie. “But I guess your mamma done somethin’ that made him pretty mad.”

Phœbe longed to know what, to ask about it. Yet she shrank from having Sophie tell her anything that might be in the slightest degree against her mother.

“I don’t know what it was,” Sophie went on. “But it got so bad between ’em that there just had to be a split-up. Course your Uncle John’s dead against divorces, bein’ a minister. The ’Piscopal Church is like that. And I kinda believe your father thinks the same way. But your Uncle Bob and your grammaw say that if a married couple ain’t happy

they oughta sep'rate, and be done with it, and not quarrel around where there's a child."

Phœbe knelt, and put a hand under Sophie's chin. "Tell me:" she begged; "When Daddy and Mother are divorced, what do you think is going to happen to me?"

"We-e-ell,"—Sophie considered the question, pursing her mouth and blinking.

"Oh, now!" challenged Phœbe, impatiently. "What do they all say?"

"What do they know about your mamma's plans?" Sophie retorted. "Maybe she'll marry again."

Phœbe threw back her head and laughed. "Marry again!" she cried. "My mother? She'd *never* do that! Never! She'll come back. And I'll live with her. I won't stay here. Not one minute! Not——"

"Sh! Sh!" warned Sophie. "Don't talk so loud. And just think over this: If your Maw *don't* marry again, maybe Mister Jim won't let you go back to her."

"Why not?"

Sophie shook her head. "I don't understand it myself," she admitted. "Only I know that your

Uncle Bob thinks there oughta be what he calls a reg'lar new home, with a husband in it to take care of your mamma."

"Daddy would take care of Mother and me," declared Phœbe, proudly. "I know Daddy."

"But y' see, after a divorce, your Daddy might want to be dead sure everything was right for you, and happy, and—and safe."

"Safe!" repeated Phœbe, disdainful. "You don't know New York. What could happen to me or Mother in our dear little apartment? Why, the whole thing—marrying again, and not being safe in New York—it's just crazy!—Oh, Sophie, how long will it be before Mother is divorced? Oh, I hope it's soon! Then I'll have her! I'll have her! Oh, *Sophie!*"

She gave Sophie a hug, and they promised each other not to breathe one word of their conversation.

"Don't you see how much it's like a movie?" Phœbe wanted to know. "Daddy steals me, then Mother tries to steal me back, then Nevada—why, it's *exactly* like a movie. And a *good* movie!"

Sophie thought so too.

CHAPTER X

THAT night, at supper, Phœbe viewed the members of her family with a new eye—with a fresh understanding. And was thrilled, as well as gratified in her vanity, by the thought that she knew quite as much about “everything” as they did. Now and then she stole a wise glance at Sophie, to which the latter gave no answering sign.

Other thoughts thrilled Phœbe even more: Daddy had stolen her!—caught her up and carried her off, precisely like the heroine in a drama! Then (delicious thought!) dear Mother had sent wire after wire—probably demanding Phœbe’s return! And had wanted to steal her back! How? Had Mother actually been here? Close? Right in the town? the neighborhood? Had she even caught glimpses of Phœbe, perhaps?

In the hour preceding her going up to bed, as she strolled with her father to the drug-store and back, she thought of a great many questions that

she meant to ask Sophie the very first chance she had.

The chance came that evening. As Phœbe was on the point of falling asleep, her door opened stealthily, there was a cautious whisper to allay any alarm, then the door closed softly and Sophie turned on the light.

"Phœbe," she began—her face was grave and her voice anxious; "you won't say a word about my tellin' you what I did this afternoon?"

"I won't," declared Phœbe.

"'Cause if the folks was to find out, they'd fire me."

Phœbe took Sophie's hand and made her sit on the bed. "Oh, there's more I want to find out," she whispered; "—lots more."

"If the folks find out you know," continued Sophie, too concerned over her own danger to think about what Phœbe was saying, "why, it needn't be me they blame. 'Cause almost anybody in town mighta told y'."

Phœbe stared. "You mean everybody *knows*?" she demanded.

"Everybody 'round here, anyhow."

"And I—I didn't know!"

"I'm sorry I told y'." Sophie turned away her face. She lifted a corner of her apron to an eye.

"Please!" begged Phœbe. "I won't tell. Honest! Didn't I promise? Only I'm—well, I hate to think about it. Everybody knew—but me."

Sophie went then. She would answer no more questions, vowing she had already told everything she knew. She left Phœbe quite cast down. It was one thing to hear such thrilling things about herself, to realize that she had been the subject of those long and heated conferences that she knew had been carried on in the library, to understand that Grandma had shed tears over her. It was quite another to find out that the whole town knew. As far as Phœbe was concerned, finding that out simply spoiled everything.

And now, every week-day morning, she and Uncle John spent three hours together in the library. All of the three hours were not spent in actual study; that is to say, whenever Uncle John got impatient and wanted to turn to his own work, he permitted Phœbe to make herself comfortable on the big, old library couch and read whatever she liked. With the awakening of her emotions, what Phœbe liked to read about was love. She found

some books by "The Duchess". They were Uncle Bob's, and they were full of romance. Phœbe devoured them—while across the room the clergyman toiled over a sermon that was, perhaps, concerned with Peter's wife's mother.

And every week-day afternoon Phœbe went driving. With such an unvarying program, she was able to live up to her determination that she would never permit herself—in that little, mean, gossiping town—to make a single friend. And certainly not *now*, since she knew that the whole town knew!

But she had scarcely made up her mind to remain cut off completely from everyone (she would punish them all!) when she made two friends. And both—though each was so different from the other—soon became very dear to her.

It was on a Saturday afternoon that the first came. Phœbe and Uncle Bob were just back from a drive, and were busy, concocting a lemonade in the butler's pantry, when Sophie came bursting in upon them. The very momentum of her entrance, the queer, excited look of her (even her hair seemed to be lifting), told Phœbe that something unusual had happened.

"Judge!" whispered Sophie.

He glanced up, half a lemon in each hand, and damp sugar on his face. Phœbe had pinned one of Sophie's aprons about him. He looked comical enough for the "movies"!

"Miss Ruth," announced Sophie.

Uncle Bob stared, as if scarcely comprehending; then dropped the lemon halves, hastily wiped his face on the apron, which Sophie unfastened, took Phœbe by the hand and started for the sitting-room.

"Who is Miss Ruth?" asked Phœbe as they went.

Uncle Bob smiled down at her. But he did not seem to see her.

There was a slender young woman with Grandma in the sitting room. She had on a dress that fell in soft folds, was mistily gray, wide-tucked, and cut out squarely at the neck to show a strong round throat. In her hands the visitor held a sun-hat, black, with a sprinkling of forget-me-nots.

"Ruth?" said Uncle Bob in greeting. And the hand that held Phœbe's trembled.

"I'm here with more Court troubles," explained Miss Ruth. She was looking at Phœbe. Her eyes were the color of the flowers on her hat.

"My dear,"—it was Grandma speaking—"this is Jim's little girl."

Phœbe went forward then. Gravely she took Miss Ruth's hand, and made the quick dipping curtsey that Mother had taught her. "How do you do," she said politely.

Miss Ruth bent and touched Phœbe's cheek with her lips. "I've wanted to meet you—often," she said. Then, as if with sudden feeling, she drew Phœbe to her, and held her close.

The welcome tenderness of it, the embracing arms, the soft, fragrant dress—it was all like Mother to Phœbe. Her eyes swam. She reached up, clasping her arms about Miss Ruth. "Oh, why haven't you ever been here before?" she asked.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Uncle Bob, triumphantly. "That's it, Phœbe! Scold her! Scold her!"

Miss Ruth seemed embarrassed. "I'm so busy always, dear," she answered. "But you'll come to see me?" Then to Uncle Bob, "Judge, it's about the Botts case again." And to Grandma, "Your son will wish his Probation Officer didn't live so close, bothering him of a Saturday like this."

"M-m-m!" commented Uncle Bob. He gave her a long, grave look.

"I've just had a telephone message from the Botts's nearest neighbor," went on Miss Ruth. "And I felt sure you'd want to do something about it before Monday. Judge, Mrs. Botts has been whipping Manila again."

"Oh, that woman!" scolded Uncle Bob.

"She's a step-mother, isn't she, Bob?" inquired Grandma. There was a gay twinkle in her old eyes.

"She's a bad step-mother," he answered. He went over to her, leaned down and gave her a resounding kiss. "But, you see, a Judge is likely to hear only of the bad ones."

"Mr. Botts isn't keeping his word," reminded Miss Ruth.

"I know," returned Uncle Bob. "He promised to put a stop to any more whipping. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Well,"—Miss Ruth hesitated—"of course, you may not agree, but I've been wondering if Manila wouldn't like to leave home."

"Suppose you ask her, Ruth."

"Or if I might send her here to see you."

"That's a good idea. It'll keep her away from the Court House, poor youngster."

Miss Ruth made as if to go then. But "What do you think of our young lady?" he wanted to know.

"Just—just what I hoped she'd be like," Miss Ruth answered, almost as if to herself. She held Phœbe away from her a little. "You will come sometimes to see me, Phœbe?"

"Oh, yes."

"I live very close."

"And—and you'll come to see me?" asked Phœbe, eagerly. What was it about Miss Ruth that she liked so well? Miss Ruth was grave. Her look was tender. The hands that held Phœbe's were firm and cool.

"If you want me to come——"

"Oh, I do!"

"Then I'll come."

Phœbe rose upon tiptoe. "Could you come after supper, maybe?" she asked. "That's—that's always the loneliest time."

Miss Ruth nodded. "And perhaps Grandma will let us have a good talk together upstairs, before you go to sleep—will you, Mrs. Blair?"

"Phœbe loves stories," answered Phœbe's grandmother. "She misses the moving-pictures she used

to see. And so if you'd tell her a story some evening, Ruth,——"

"Or," put in Phœbe, quickly, "if you know some songs—if you'd sing to me, like mother used to sing. I—I like that."

"I'll come." Miss Ruth kissed Phœbe again. "But you've Grandma, and Uncle John, and Uncle Robert, and——and your father——"

Phœbe raised an eager face. "I'd like to have you, too. Because,"—her voice faltered—"oh, it takes an awful lot of love to—to make up for my mother."

"I won't fail to come." Miss Ruth left then, and Phœbe, with Uncle Bob beside her, stood at the wide glass door of the sitting-room, watching the gray dress flutter its way, mistily, across the lawn to the driveway gate.

"Well, little Phœbe?" said the Judge. He had her hand, and he squeezed it.

Phœbe understood. "Uncle Bob," she confided, "I like her. And I wish she lived here right with us."

Judge Blair nodded. "Ah, that's what I've been saying," he answered; "yes, I've been saying that for years, and years—and years."

CHAPTER XI

PHŒBE thought about that, wondering what Uncle Bob meant. Something kept her from asking him. Was it the strange look on his face as he watched Miss Ruth go? Or was it the way in which he went out, hands stuffed in pockets, head down, grave—curiously unlike his usual smiling self? And how did he want Miss Ruth to live at Grandma's? As a sort of helper, like Sophie? That was not likely. Perhaps Miss Ruth boarded nearby, and Uncle Bob wanted her to board at the Blair house. Phœbe made up her mind to ask Sophie, source of all confidential information. She stored up Uncle Bob's last words so that she could not fail to remember them: "*Yes, I've been saying that for years, and years,—and years.*"

But before her opportunity came to question Sophie, and while she was still watching out in the direction Miss Ruth had gone, she saw a strange little figure coming across the grass—coming slowly, in fact almost sidling, with glances up at the

higher windows of the house, and those formidable gingerbread turrets.

At first Phœbe was sure that it was a boy, all dressed up grotesquely, as New York boys dressed themselves every Thanksgiving Day. For surely (the figure was close now) no young person ever could have *real* hair that was so red, or wear a hat, except in fun, that was so queer and green. And then the dress—too loose, and too long. And the shoes—! So large!

Suddenly Phœbe's heart gave a leap. It was not a dressed-up boy: It was a girl! "A girl in disguise!" concluded Phœbe, excitedly, with moving-picture plots springing to her mind. "And she's flying from the enemy!"

The girl halted at a little distance, fearfully. Then Phœbe went out to meet her, and also halted. The two looked at each other.

"Won't you come in?" asked Phœbe at last, politely.

The girl hung her head.

"Come on in," persisted Phœbe. "Nobody's going to hurt you." She turned and led the way, and the girl followed.

She was about Phœbe's own age, but pale, and

looked ill-fed and unhappy. Her eyes were so light a gray that they seemed colorless, and milky. Her under-jaw had a way of dropping. Her hands were soiled, and red.

"You needn't be afraid, little girl," declared Phœbe, when they were in the sitting-room, and the door to the lawn was shut. "You just tell me what you want."

But the other seemed tongue-tied. Her mouth was open, but not a word came forth. She fidgeted, and a blush suffused her many freckles, clothing them from sight.

"Now, what do you want?" encouraged Phœbe again. "Please. Just say it right out."

"Th' Judge,"—with not a movement of the lips.

Phœbe stared. She understood. Uncle Bob, reigning over the local Juvenile Court, looked after children exclusively. Here, helpless, homely, and pathetic, was one of his charges. "Have you been a bad child?" she asked sorrowfully.

"Naw."

"Then what—what have you been?"

"L-l-licked!"

"Oh!" Phœbe went to her, taking one of the

red hands, and drew her to a chair. "You poor little girl! Here! Sit down. Now tell me. Who licked you?"

The pale eyes became suddenly alive with fear. The drooping mouth tightened, and trembled. "Step-mother!"

"Oh!" cried Phoebe again. "You—so you've got a step!"

"Uh-huh."

Phoebe sat down and regarded her visitor, marveling at her. A step-mother—a cruel step-mother who beat and tortured, exactly like the step-mothers in the movies! "Then you're Manila Botts," she declared.

"Yop."

Somehow, Phoebe, hearing the name from Miss Ruth, had thought of Manila Botts as some one tall and plump—quite a grown person. And here—! "Tell me about your step-mother," she bade.

"She's a woman," ventured Manila, helplessly.

"Well?"

"And she's married to my father—but she don't like him."

"I know." Phoebe nodded sadly. "They sit at

the table, and don't speak, and don't kiss each other good-night."

"But she spends all Paw's money," went on Manila. "And she hits me. Look!" She drew up a loose sleeve. There on the thin arm was a dark welt.

Phoebe gasped.

Manila, pleased with the effect she had produced, warmed to further details. "She hits me with a piece of harness. It's half of a tug. And once she hurt me so bad that I went to Court."

"But doesn't your daddy help you?" demanded Phoebe.

"Nope. Just boozes" She lowered the sleeve resignedly.

Phoebe gave a quick look around. Then, "It's almost like a picture I once saw:" she said; "Her Terrible Sin. There was a woman in it who got whipped by a man who was tipsy."

"Gosh!" breathed Manila. "And what'll you do if *you* get a step?"

Phoebe sat back. "*Me?*" she demanded, and swallowed.

Manila nodded.

Phœbe said nothing. She felt her heart swelling; her ears sang. She wanted to take hold of Manila and pound at her with a fist. She hated her! She hated——!

Sophie came in. "The Judge is in the lib'ry, Manila," she said, somewhat reprovingly. As Manila rose, Sophie took her by a shoulder and led her hallward.

But Phœbe stayed where she was. A storm was raging in her breast. Sophie had suggested a step-father, and Phœbe had been able to laugh. Did she not know Mother?—dear, beautiful, devoted Mother, who would no more think of doing anything that could hurt her small daughter than of—than of—well, committing the most awful crime: murder, or stealing, or setting some house on fire. Why, who would think of giving the matter of a step-father even a second thought? Besides, the "movies" never pictured wicked, cruel step-fathers. There were, probably, step-fathers in existence. Even so, whoever heard of their being undesirable?

But this was different. Soon that father so dear to Phœbe would be entirely free—it was Mother

who was setting him free. (And this gave Phœbe at once a sense of her mother's generosity.) Once free——!

“O-o-oh!” she gasped, and covered her face.

CHAPTER XII

Her father—hers! And some woman!

It hurt Phœbe cruelly. And the pain was a double one. For she suffered on her own account, imagining a nebulous figure intrude itself between her and the father she loved with such a feeling of absolute possession; and she suffered for her mother. A strange woman in that mother's place!—in that dear New York nest, at the dainty, round table in the cosy dining-room, in Mother's corner of the davenport before the open fire of the little drawing-room! The pictures that Manila's foreboding called up succeeded one another upon her mind's eye as if it were the screen of a moving-picture theatre.

That was it! She understood all that Manila's suggestion might mean because she knew step-mothers so well! Yes, she could even remember certain ones in the movies, though not clearly. One fact she was sure of: *All* step-mothers were cruel!

Miserable as she was, she did not think of seek-

ing her father, of telling him what she feared, and how hurt she was. She felt angry toward him; she resented the way he was acting! Why should he think of another wife? And Mother away out there alone!

Phœbe went up to her room. Facing this new, threatening trouble, she wanted seclusion. But not seclusion to weep. Her eyes were dry, and her head was up. This was a thing that called for action—action! She must *do* something! She must! And what?

She knew! Standing in the middle of the room, talking to herself under her breath, suddenly it came to her. She would thwart any plan of her father's to marry again! Did not people always thwart other people's plans in the moving-pictures? Well, then, *she* would thwart.

From that hour forward she began to watch her father, secretly, jealously. And she discovered things about him that made her uneasy. Why did he always have that far-away look in his eyes? Why did he keep his lips shut so tight, with that knotting in the jaws that told her how hard his teeth were set together? Why did he walk the dull red carpet of Grandma's sitting-room so often

and so nervously? She had seen "movie" heroes act like that. *Were all these signs that Daddy was in love?*

She made up her mind to hunt Manila, and ask her just how *her* father had acted before he married that awful step-mother.

Meanwhile, seeing these things which at least conveyed worry, she came to forget herself in concern over her father. He was unhappy. Yet not about Mother, for it was clear that he did not care for Mother. Then of course he was suffering about someone else. She must try to distract his thoughts to herself. She would redouble her tenderness toward him. She would spend more time with him, kiss him oftener.

During the days that immediately followed, there came into her face and voice and manner a sweet concern toward him. She took to little attentions, such as finding his hat for him when he left the house, or hanging it up when he came in; she lighted his cigarettes; she searched for bits of lint, or small lengths of thread, on his coat. In other words, young and slim-legged as she was,—a baby still in most ways—she yet was assuming toward her father the rôle of little mother: she was yearn-

ing over him. Oh, her Daddy! Her dear, dear Daddy!

After a time, her worry about him lessened somewhat. Few women came to the house, and these were mostly elderly. And her father went out scarcely at all—never in the evenings. If he and she walked together, he often met women whom he knew, and bowed to them, smiling. If he seemed inclined to stop for a chat, Phœbe was quick to urge him on—first of all because she would not let herself be cordial to anyone in the town, and, second, because any woman might be *the* woman.

But her father never cared to linger when she pulled a little at his arm. Hopefully she had to admit that he did not seem to like any particular person.

Then one day real fear came to her—with a definite object for her jealousy. By chance she and her father stopped at the drug-store down the street—the drug-store to which she loved to hop and skip, the while she nonchalantly bounced the rubber ball. This day when she called for her ice-cream soda, the pretty young woman came forward as usual to wait on her. The pretty young woman seemed to know Phœbe's father well—very, well indeed—al-

most too well! She smiled across the counter at him: she said, "How are you?" familiarly: she even called him "Jim".

Phœbe ate her ice-cream soda with a troubled heart. Her father did not eat anything. He talked with the pretty young woman. And the latter urged more ice-cream upon Phœbe when the tall glass was half empty. That aroused Phœbe's suspicions. She declined a second helping. She understood the purpose behind a second helping! "She wants to get in with me," Phœbe thought. "That's because she likes Daddy."

She left some of her soda in order to get him out of the store and away. And she came to hate the drug-store young woman. Once at the table she made fun of her—of her teeth. Her father said nothing, even seemed not to hear. Grandma said "Darling!" reprovingly. But Phœbe cared nothing about the reproof. There was something at stake—something terribly important. She determined never to go near that drug-store again.

This was more than mere thwarting; already the budding woman was plotting against a rival!

Next, she made a practice, when her father went down town, to go with him as far as that drug-

store and see him well past it! And when she had kissed him good-bye at some corner, she returned with no glance toward that counter which had always yielded such generous sodas and sundaes.

One day Phœbe got a fright. The drug-store young woman ran out to them, to intercept them. Doctor Blair, she said, wanted to speak to Phœbe's father on the drug-store telephone. Phœbe was forced to accompany her father into the place. But she went warily, and she declined to have a soda. She came away with fear. And when she was home once more she wrote her father a note.

"Dear Daddy," it ran, "I don't like the girl at the drug-store. You know what I mean. I hate her, I hate her, I hate her. Her grammar is bad. She says don't instead of doesn't, like Sophie. Darling, darling Daddy."

She did not give him the note. It was fortunate that she did not. For the very next day, as she came homeward after seeing her father safe beyond that dangerous corner, here came the object of her hate. The girl was pushing before her a white perambulator. In the carriage was a big rosy baby.

Phœbe would have passed girl and baby without a look. But the former halted her. "Oh, Phœbe, you've never seen my little son," she said.

Phœbe halted, wide of eyes and mouth. Son? That meant marriage—a husband!

"My mother-in-law takes care of him," explained the drug-store girl. (But of course she was a girl no longer. She was a grown woman—if she was married and had a baby.)

"He's nice," said Phœbe; "—like you."

After that she often went with her father to have ice-cream sodas at the drug-store. And always, in his hearing, she asked after the baby and after the baby's father, and she rather prided herself on having carried out this particular case of thwarting very well indeed.

But with the young drug-store woman out of the way, she still had no peace of mind. For now there rose up in her day-dreams the vision of a wholly imaginary step-mother. The visionary figure was no longer nebulous. And it was forbidding. Friends of her own age, school-life, even the sympathetic companionship of a woman she could have trusted, would have driven the vision from her thoughts. But in that adult household, where all of

her little confidences were given to no one, her morbidity grew until the figure she had imagined came to seem to be alive.

It met her at quick, dim turns in the big lower hall, or on the dark stair-landing. It lurked in her clothes-closet, usurping the place of the Other Thing, which now disappeared. Worst of all, she could imagine the figure in her father's room!

Curiously enough, it bore no likeness to any of the screen step-mothers Phœbe had seen. This imaginary step-mother was tall, bony, heavy-shouldered and long-armed, with sullen eyes and graying brown hair combed straight back to show a wrinkled brow. What the rest of the face was like, Phœbe never imagined. It was always the brow and the eyes that caught her fleet glance as she hurried by.

That her father would scarcely choose such a woman to be his second wife, somehow never occurred to Phœbe. Had not Botts, poor liquor-soddened, but kindly, soul, acquired Mrs. Botts when unquestionably he did not want her? Such things happened to widowers and divorced men. They were matrimonially helpless. And the vision that Phœbe's fear called up was of all things formidable,

and overbearing, yet silent—with the silence that means power.

Phœbe trembled when she thought of her, and at those certain dim places where the figure met her she felt an awful prickling of the skin.

Her face grew gaunt. Her nose seemed pinched. Her cheeks lost some of their color. So that Uncle Bob talked about a tonic.

But Phœbe did not want a tonic. "Mother doesn't believe in medicine for children," she declared. "She'd like it better if I didn't take any. Wouldn't she, Daddy?"

Her father looked at her keenly. Then he tucked her under his arm. "I want a talk with my baby," he declared. They went into Grandma's room together. And no one followed them. Evidently her father had something very particular to say.

He had. For when he was seated, he drew her to him, and looked up into her face—anxiously! "I've got something important to tell you," he said.

"About Mother?" she asked eagerly.

"N-n-ot exactly."

As he looked away, plainly embarrassed, a great fear came to her. What Manila had said was com-

ing true—and he was about to confess it! A step-mother!

She longed then to kneel beside him, to beg him to promise her that he would never marry, to tell him she could not bear it. But she held back.

"No, it's just that I have to take quite a trip," her father went on.

"West?" she cried. She turned his face. Her eyes were shining.

"To South America—Peru," he answered.

"Oh." She backed a little, trying to adjust herself to the news. Once she had seen him go on such trips with little or no concern. Now the thought of his leaving hurt keenly.

"I sha'n't be gone long," he said comfortingly. And kissed her.

"Daddy,—while you're gone—may I go West? To Mother?"

"I'm afraid—not—just right away."

"But if you go—to tell Mother good-bye." She was pressing the point. For one thing she wanted to know before he went the truth from him about the divorce.

"I—I sha'n't be going."

Her eyes stared into his. "Daddy! You and Mother *are* divorced!"

"Phœbe!" he gasped, plainly astounded.

"*Did* you steal me away from Mother?" she demanded.

"Has someone told you that?"

She nodded.

He shook his head. "Oh, my little girl!" he said sadly.

"Daddy! It isn't true!" Now she knelt, looking up at him, imploring.

"All your life, Phœbe," he began, "I've kept one thought in front of me always: your happiness. I want you to believe that——"

"I do!"

"Whatever I've done—even if it doesn't turn out right—remember that I never considered myself, only my daughter. I brought you here, where you miss your Mother, when I knew your little heart would ache. Oh, Phœbe,"—he bent toward her lovingly—"you used to notice, didn't you, that in New York, when Daddy left the apartment, he kissed only you good-bye?"

"Yes."

"And for a long time you haven't seen Daddy and Mother go anywhere together."

"Daddy," she whispered, with a quick look beyond him, lest she be overheard, "don't you like my mother?"

"Ah, Phœbe!" He shook his head again, sighing. "Ah, if I could only spare my little girl!"

"Daddy!" she cried, her arms suddenly about him. "Dear, dear Daddy!"

"Phœbe, you must try to understand," he counseled; "and take it all just like the little woman you are. Then you and I will decide what's best—nobody else. It's your happiness I'll think of—just you!"

She felt now that she was to hear the truth. She was ready to confide in him all her fears of a step-mother—even her jealousy; ready to say if, above all things, he wanted her happiness, then he could give her that by putting no new wife in her mother's place.

But her father got no further with what he plainly intended to say to her. And Phœbe was not able to open her young heart to him. For their conference was broken in upon by Sophie, who entered, smiling, telegram in hand.

"Boy wants a' answer, Mr. Jim," she announced.

Phœbe's father took the yellow envelope with a trace of irritation at being interrupted.

"Oh, Daddy, is it from Mother?" Phœbe questioned.

He did not answer. The telegram was open in his hand. He was reading it, and his hand was shaking.

"Wait!" he bade, as Sophie turned to go.

"Is it?—Oh, Daddy!" pleaded Phœbe. She saw with alarm that his face had gone suddenly white.

He rose, crushing the wire and thrusting it into a pocket. "Where is my mother?" he asked the girl.

"In the dinin'-room."

In obedience to his gesture, Sophie went out. He turned to Phœbe. "I must see Uncle Bob," he said quietly. Then, leaning to lift her to her feet, "And you go into the garden for a little while, till Daddy wants you." He kissed her.

Phœbe asked no other question. She was used to mystery, to being bewildered. But she knew something had happened—something out of the ordinary. It was no business telegram that could

drive the color from her father's face and set his fingers to trembling. As she walked over the lawn she reflected that, after all, everyday life very closely resembled the "movies".

CHAPTER XIII

It was Grandma who came for Phoebe. And the latter saw that there was no smile on the kind old face, and that Grandma's head was shaking very hard. Hand in hand, silently, the two went into the library.

Uncle John was there, leaning against the mantel. Though his look was lowered, Phoebe knew that he was angry. Uncle Bob stood nearby, hands in pockets. He nodded Phoebe a greeting. Phoebe's father was not there. And Phoebe wondered.

"Little old dumpling," said Uncle Bob. She came to him, and he looked down at her with a tender smile.

"Yes?" There was more curiosity than concern in her voice.

"A telegram has just come from—from Nevada," went on Uncle Bob.

Her face lighted. Up came her hands, to reach toward him joyously. "Mother!" she breathed.

He shook his head. "The telegram is from a

Doctor," he answered. "Your mother is—is pretty sick. She has asked your daddy to come."

"Oh!—but—but you think Mother will get well?"

"Of course she will," declared Uncle Bob stoutly.

The next moment, here came Phœbe's father, a suit-case in one hand, his hat in the other. Behind him was Sophie, carrying his overcoat. He said nothing, only put down the suit-case, crossed to Phœbe, and took her hand.

She lifted a beaming face to his. "Oh, Daddy," she said tremulously. "Now I know you and Mother are *not* divorced!"

He smiled at her. The others moved—started, rather. Phœbe saw them and heard them, and realized that she had shocked. She reddened.

"My little Phœbe!" said her father, tenderly.

She strove to explain herself, to lessen the bad effect she felt she had made on the others. "I knew you weren't," she apologized. "I didn't believe it, Daddy. I'm sorry I said it to you!—Oh, Daddy, take me with you!"

Her father turned to his mother. But it was Dr. Blair who spoke. "No, Jim!" he cried.

"What do you think, Bob?" asked Phœbe's father.

Uncle Bob shrugged. "How can I judge Helen's feelings?" he answered, with a trace of bitterness. "I have no child."

"Oh, I understand you, Bob," retorted his eldest brother, angrily. "But you know"—significantly—"there are occasions not proper for a child."

Phœbe did not understand what Uncle John meant. Evidently her father did; furthermore, it seemed to decide him. "Give me a message for Mother," he said to Phœbe, and drew her to him.

She took her disappointment bravely. "Tell her I love her, Daddy. And tell her to come back to me." Then, imploringly, "Oh, promise you'll bring my mother back!"

"I will bring her back, darling," he promised. "When Mother is better, we'll all try to be happy again—for your sake." He kissed her, turned, kissed his mother, took up the suit-case, and was gone.

Uncle Bob followed. In one hand he had a roll of bills that Uncle John had given him; with the other he searched a trouser pocket.

When the door shut behind Uncle Bob, Phœbe sat down, not helplessly, but she felt a trifle weak,

as if some sort of a prop had been taken out from under her.

Her Uncle John was suddenly anxious. "Now, you won't cry, will you, my child?" he asked.

"Cry?" she repeated, with a touch of pride. "Oh, no. I'm just saying to myself, over and over, 'Daddy isn't divorced from my mother. And he'll bring her back! He'll bring her back!' That makes me so happy." She gulped. Tears swam in the gray-blue eyes, but she smiled through them. The happiest thought of all she could not mention: that she might now dismiss forever the possibility of having a step-mother! She would have her own mother again, and the dear New York home, and her father, and Sally, the maid, yes, and the gold-fish, and—the "movies"! "I—I wish I had my old doll," she added, aloud, but as if to herself.

"Your doll, darling?" questioned Grandma.

"Isn't our little woman pretty big for a doll?"—this from Uncle John.

"It's just—I—I want something to—to hold, and love," Phoebe explained.

"Won't you come to me, darling?" asked Grandma.

"I'm—all right," Phoebe declared reassuringly.

"Uncle John loves you, Phœbe,"—it was Uncle John again, and he was actually referring to himself in precisely the way that Uncle Bob and her father always did. "Uncle John never had a little girl, so his love goes out to you."

"Thank you," said Phœbe.

Uncle Bob had come in while his brother was speaking. He grinned at Phœbe across the room. "How about the fat old Judge?" he demanded. "Is he any comfort?"

She nodded vigorously.

"Oh, we all love you, dear," quavered Grandma.

"I know," acknowledged Phœbe.

"Don't you love anybody but Daddy and Mother?" asked Uncle Bob.

"Oh, yes."

"I thought so! Grandma, and Uncle John, and a wee bit of love for yours truly——"

"And I love Miss Ruth."

Uncle Bob sobered. He looked down, thoughtfully. "Miss Ruth," he repeated. "Ah, yes. Who doesn't love Miss Ruth."

"Manila loves her," confided Phœbe. "Sophie told me all about it. Miss Ruth has been so good to Manila. She calls Miss Ruth 'Angel'."

"But you—why, you hardly know Miss Ruth." There was a strange expression on Uncle Bob's face. He was looking at Phœbe, but he seemed to be thinking of something far away. "Why do you love her?"

Phœbe put her head on one side. "I don't exactly know why," she admitted. In her heart, she knew this was not strictly true. There was a reason for liking Miss Ruth. It had to do with Phœbe's jealousy about a step-mother. Phœbe had noticed that of all the women whom her father knew, Miss Ruth, alone, never stopped when he met her, to smile and make herself agreeable, but only bowed pleasantly and passed on. In other words, Phœbe had no reason to fear Miss Ruth. "She's nice," she supplemented now. "And I—I just do."

"I understand," said Uncle Bob.

There was a moment of silence then, of constrained silence. Phœbe felt that constraint, and glanced at her grandmother—just in time to see a finger lifted in warning at Uncle John, and a shake of the head that was intentional.

Phœbe wondered if something was wrong about Miss Ruth. She made up her mind to ask Sophie.

She thought of Sophie because the girl had just entered, abruptly. She had a yellow envelope in her hand. "Here's another telegram, Judge," she announced.

Phœbe rose. "Mother?" she asked, as Uncle Bob tore at the envelope.

"Bob!" said Grandma. She laid an anxious hand on his arm.

From the near distance sounded the long-drawn whistle of a train.

"Listen!" said Uncle John.

"Read the wire," urged Grandma. "Quick! We can telephone the depot."

Uncle Bob shook his head. "No, Mother," he answered. "If this is from Helen, no matter what it says it's best that Jim should go." He spread the telegram out.

Afterwards, for the rest of her life, Phœbe was destined never to forget that minute, or the hours and the days that immediately followed. For the minute was to bring a great crisis into her life, and the hours and the days were to be filled with sorrow.

Uncle Bob read the wire. He took, Phœbe thought, a good while to read it. And he made a

curious face at it, a grimace that seemed half comical, half sad. Then he handed the paper to Grandma, and turned to lean on the high, leather-covered back of the couch.

Grandma read the telegram and—let it slip from her fingers to the floor.

Ordinarily Phœbe would have sprung to pick up anything that Grandma might drop. What held her back now? She could not have forced herself even to touch that rectangle of paper! She only stared down at it.

"Precious little girl," faltered Grandma. She sank to a chair—feebly.

"What——?" began Phœbe. "My—my mother——?"

"Phœbe," said Uncle John, more tenderly than he had ever spoken to her in all the past months. "Phœbe, your mother is—in Heaven."

Phœbe understood. The blood went out of her face. Something drove through her body from head to foot, like a stroke of lightning. But though she swayed a little, she kept her foothold. Hers was a staunch little soul.

"She's all Blair," Uncle Bob had once said of her. Now as she set her teeth together, and

clenched her fingers on her palms, she was taking her blow in true Blair fashion.

Uncle Bob came round to the front of the couch. That big, moon-like face of his was working as he, too, strove for control. He sat down, and held out his arms. "Phœbe!" he whispered. "Little, little Phœbe!"

She lifted a hand to her face, brushed at a cheek, tried to straighten, swallowed—then made toward him unsteadily, and stumbled against his breast.

CHAPTER XIV

PHOEBE knew a great deal about death. Had she not seen it thousands of times on the screen, and in nearly every conceivable form?—by fire and water, by famine, by the knife of the assassin, the cup of the poisoner, the burglar's automatic, the soldier's bayonet. Comfortably seated beside her mother or Sally, before a great curtain that sprang into life as the theatre darkened, she had even watched the waging of the Great War!

So it was easy for her, with her imagination thus trained and stimulated, to call up—once she knew of her mother's death—such pictures in her mind as could augment to the point of torture the natural grief of her fourteen years. She saw her mother die alone, weeping out her last moments; or she saw a nurse and a priest watching beside that distant bed. She saw other things that made her shudder, and cover her eyes, or cling to whomever was nearest for the comfort and sympathy that could drive away such terrible visions.

That first week was a week of poignant suffering. She was not left alone one moment. By day she was passed, as it were, from hand to hand in the household, taking her turn with Sophie in the kitchen of a morning, spending the early afternoon with Grandma, the later hours with Uncle Bob. By night she slept only if someone sat beside her, in her high, big room, and held her hand. Sometimes Grandma stayed the first half of the night, or Sophie. After midnight it was Uncle Bob who took his place at her pillow.

There was something particularly sweet and comforting to Phœbe about that companionship through the night. If she started from troubled dreams, and cried out, always there was an answering voice, low and loving, to soothe her; and there were tender kisses, and in the dark a hand would caress her cheek or smooth her hair. Then she would murmur a little, brokenly, and sleep again.

She found that a bereavement was not without its compensations! For one thing, the local newspapers had short, but kind, notices of the death, in the Far West, of Mrs. James Blair. And there were references to "the little daughter, Phœbe, now residing with her grandmother, Mrs. John G. Blair".

Never before had Phœbe seen her own name in print. She liked the notices. They made her cry, but they also interested her strangely.

Then there were the black bands which Grandma sewed on the left sleeves of Phœbe's Sunday and second-best dresses. Uncle John had opposed the bands strongly, and in Phœbe's presence. He did not approve of the wearing of mourning by children. But Uncle Bob thought otherwise. "It's the least we can do," he said firmly. Grandma agreed. Sophie thought a black band was "awful swell". And as for Phœbe, a band on her sleeve seemed to set her apart, somehow, to single her out particularly. And she liked to wear it. She was almost proud of it!

There were other compensations. People sent her flowers, and candy, and Miss Simpson wrote her a note of condolence—a most polite note, which Phœbe tore up! And there was another letter, a "Round Robin" from eight of the girls at Miss Simpson's. Phœbe was so happy when it came—happy in a triumphant way. This letter she also destroyed. And she refused to answer either.

"They didn't like me when my mother was alive," she declared. "And they said things about Mother."

"Good for you, old dumpling!" commended Uncle Bob. "There's spunk for you!"

"Don't encourage Phœbe in that sort of thing!" begged Uncle John.

"They're a lot of hypocrites," declared his brother. "And this youngster's got sense enough to know it. Why didn't they show some sympathy over the other thing?"

"True," agreed Uncle John. "For that was worse than death."

"Exactly. But now, they begin their writing. They were thinking of themselves when they—when I took Phœbe away from there. And now whom are they thinking about?—that Simpson woman's pocket-book! Confound them!"

Phœbe gave some reflection to that short passage between her uncles. What was worse than death? She knew: scandal!

But the most gratifying thing that happened to her was a surprise. One night she wakened to find her hand in the clasp of a hand smaller than Uncle Bob's, softer than Sophie's, firmer than Grandma's. And without being told who it was, she instantly guessed. "Miss Ruth!" she whispered.

"It is Miss Ruth, Phœbe," came the whisper back. Velvet lips touched her forehead and her hair. An arm went round her, to pat the slender shoulders and tuck in the covers.

"I love you," sighed Phœbe, contented, and slept again.

After that Miss Ruth continued to come. Often in the darkness, if Phœbe was wakeful, Miss Ruth would tell her stories—wonderful stories, about princesses and knights, goblins and dwarfs and fairies. These were all new to Phœbe, who knew best the more modern stories of the films.

"Why didn't you ever come to see us before?" Phœbe wanted to know.

"You like me, don't you, dear?" Miss Ruth returned happily. It was early morning, and Phœbe had just wakened. Already the room was lightening with the dawn. Miss Ruth leaned down and cupped Phœbe's cheek in the palm of a hand. "And you're like your father," she added with a tender smile.

Soon there came a time when Phœbe slept through the nights without waking, when watchers were no longer needed beside her bed. She did not understand how it was, but she had come

to feel two things: First, it did not seem true that her mother was dead, and having had no letters from her mother since leaving New York, there was not even the cutting off of messages to bring home to Phœbe her loss; second, her mother's death settled finally a question that had vexed Phœbe sorely, the troublesome question of what was going to happen once the divorce was granted. Now Phœbe knew. She had only Daddy! She would go with Daddy.

And as this fact was borne in upon her, she remembered the matter that Manila had broached. She recollected, too, the decision she herself had made—to thwart. "And I must get at it," she declared. "Because now, with Mother gone it's likely——"

She wrote her father. From Nevada he had gone on directly southward, and his address was such a very strange one that Phœbe had her Uncle Bob direct her envelope. But no one saw what she wrote. Though what she wrote was not what she had fully intended to say. At first she had determined to tell him frankly that she could never, never bear to have a step-mother, who would hate her, and beat her with part of a tug, and turn her

father against her. She ended by sending him four cheerful, newsy pages; only at the end did she allow herself to touch remotely upon what was uppermost in her mind.

"Darling Daddy," ran her final paragraph, *"you don't like anybody but me, do you? Oh, dear Daddy, say you don't."*

When the letter was gone (she posted it herself), she realized that now, with Mother dead, it would be harder than ever for her if her father were to marry a second time. She saw that she must have counsel from someone. And who knew more about the whole thing than Manila? She determined to see Manila.

During those first weeks following Phœbe's arrival from New York, how anxious the family had been that she should meet and talk to no one. But now, as during Phœbe's attendance at Miss Simpson's, her uncles and her grandmother were more than anxious that she should have company—and plenty of it, so that her thoughts would not dwell too much upon her loss.

"Aren't there some little girls that you'd like to have come?" Grandma often wanted to know.

This gave Phœbe her opportunity! "I'd like to see Manila," she announced one day.

And so it came about that Manila paid Phœbe a second visit, and the two went out to the summer-house, taking along Phœbe's old doll, and Phœbe told Manila all about Mother, and wept, her head on Manila's knee, and confessed her fears and her intention to thwart.

Manila was practical. "Well, if he comes back with a Peru wife you can't do nothin'," she argued. (So monosyllabic as a rule, Manila, when it came to the subject of step-mothers, could be even talkative!) "But if he comes back alone, why——"

"What?" asked Phœbe. "Because if he went to the movies, he'd *know* step-mothers are bad. But he doesn't. And I can't think how to show him. I just can't."

"I know." Manila nodded solemnly.

"How?"

"We'll show him *mine*."

"Oh, Manila!" Phœbe was overjoyed. "That's a wonderful plan! Daddy'll see her, and he'll hate her. But how can you get him to see her?"

Manila laughed. "Easy!" she declared. "I'll fix it so's she'll foller me here."

Phœbe looked at her with awe—and respect. “Suppose she was to try to kill you!” she ventured. “Step-mothers are awful bad in the movies.”

“Let her kill me,” answered Manila, philosophically. “Then the Judge’d have her hung.”

“Say, what does your step-mother look like?” Phœbe wanted to know.

Manila thought. “She’s like a rat most,” she concluded finally. “She’s slim, and she goes around so’s you don’t hear her comin’. She has black eyes, and slick hair, and a sniffy nose.”

“Ugh!” breathed Phœbe. (After that the imaginary step-mother that lurked in the big Blair house whenever the light was dim, took on a rat-like personality—slenderness, stealthiness, small black eyes and sniffy nose.)

Phœbe visualized the lady under discussion. “The Hanging of the Rat-Woman,” she mused. “That would be a wonderful title.”

Manila thought so too.

“I wish I was a big cat,” she confided, “I’d wait behind somethin’, and when Mrs. Botts come by, I’d jump at her, and break her back.” Manila’s face was pale with the thrill of it, and with hate. Phœbe regarded her more respectfully than ever.

"I run away today," went on Manila. "I don't never ask Mrs. Botts what I can do, and Paw was downtown. Miss Ruth telephoned, and when she said you wanted to see me, over I come."

"But when you get home—?" It was Phœbe's time to go white.

Manila's eyes narrowed. "If she licks me, I'll tell the Judge on her," she threatened. "And he'll have her in Court, and shame her like he did once before. And a lickin' don't hurt long."

Manila waited about that afternoon long past the time when, in the natural order of events, Phœbe thought her visitor should have gone. For supper-time approached, and yet Manila lingered.

"Are you afraid?" Phœbe wanted to know.

"Uh-uh," denied Manila. "I'm waitin' till I'm sure Paw is back. If Mrs. Botts licks me I want him to see. Then I yell hard, and the folks on either side call Paw up on the phone."

When Manila went, Phœbe experienced real terror. At the supper-table, not being able to eat, she confided her fears to Grandma and her uncles. Whereupon Uncle Bob promptly called the Botts home up on the telephone. Mrs. Botts answered. She seemed as quiet as possible, he said.

"But she'll bide her time, the vixen!" he added. "And Manila oughtn't to leave home like that. I have my hands full enough as it is."

Phœbe said nothing. What if he knew that she and Manila had planned, when the time should be ripe, so to tantalize Mrs. Botts that the latter would invade the Blair house, there to serve to Phœbe's father as a horrible example of a real step-mother?

"Just let the mean old thing keep away from here," said Phœbe, by way of tactfully turning Uncle Bob from even a suspicion of that plan.

"My dear niece!" chided Uncle John.

CHAPTER XV

AT once lessons were resumed, filling the morning hours of each week-day. And a strict program of driving was followed out each afternoon that the weather permitted. In consequence of which Phoebe had little time to herself, and none for Manila.

"They don't want me to have even one friend," Phoebe concluded resentfully. "And Uncle John wants me to forget Mother."

He was leading Phoebe from chapter to chapter of "A Child's History of England," each chapter, to her mind, being dryer and more tiresome than the last. She determined that no one should make her forget her mother, and lengthened her prayers, therefore, saying the first one reverently to God, but always, the portrait before her, making her final, and longer one, to her mother.

Also she spoke to Uncle Bob about the History. "It doesn't seem like anything for a child," she complained.

"Pretty dry—after the movies?" he suggested.

Phœbe assented. "I'm used to something exciting."

"I understand," he said gently. "But, little old dumpling, later on, when you're older, you'll be mighty sorry if you don't read all these things. The movies are all right—as entertainment. They're like the dessert at the end of dinner. But don't fail to know about the substantial things. The day is past when girls need only to be pretty and fluffy. We don't want fluffy women, either. Great things have just happened on this earth. You must know about them, and you must know about the things that went before them. Uncle Bob wants you to be fine, and good, and wise, and womanly, like—like Miss Ruth, for instance."

Phœbe remembered that she wanted to ask Sophie about Miss Ruth. Sophie had afternoons off; not Thursday afternoons, like Sally, but occasional ones, when, in her very best coat-suit, with a hat upon which were brick-red plumes, she set forth to shop, or make calls or see a *matinée*.

Phœbe, going promptly to find and question her, found her descending the back-stairs, drawing on, as she went, white gloves that were half a size too

small. Her face was shining from a vigorous soaping, as well as with expectancy. Phœbe joined her, and went as far as the gate, bouncing the rubber ball on the way.

"Sophie, what's a probation officer?" she wanted to know.

"It's a party that keeps a' eye on another party," Sophie declared; "to see if they're behavin'. Miss Ruth Shepard is one. Your Uncle Bob tells her who to watch, and it's always some kid."

Phœbe looked back at the house, and lowered her voice confidentially. "Why did Uncle Bob say he wished Miss Ruth lived at our house?" she asked. "He said he'd been saying she ought to for years and years and years."

At first Sophie did not answer. But when they reached the gate, past which Phœbe was not to go, Sophie put it between them, then turned to lean upon it.

"If I tell you, you'll tell," she charged.

"Cross my heart to die!" vowed Phœbe.

"Well, y' see, the fact is the Judge just worships Miss Ruth."

"O-o-oh."

"Yes, he's in love with her.—Now, don't you

dare say I told you, because I'd lose my job.—But he's been in love with her since before you was born."

"I don't blame him," declared Phœbe. "She's dear, and she's pretty. And I love her."

A strange look came into Sophie's eyes—a searching look. "Say! You let everybody see you love her, will y'?" she asked.

"Of course! Because I do."

"You show your grammaw how y' feel, and your uncles, and also your papa."

"I will."

"Because Miss Ruth is good," Sophie went on. She was oddly grave, for some reason. "Don't forget that, Phœbe. She's the nicest woman in this town. But—she's never been happy." Sophie sighed. "Things've never gone right for Miss Ruth, some way."

"And she doesn't love Uncle Bob?" persisted Phœbe.

Sophie drew back. "You know all you oughta know about it," she said, laughing. "Now run home, dearie, to Grammaw."

"Uncle Bob isn't handsome," conceded Phœbe.

"He's too short, and he's bald, and a little old, too——"

"Miss Ruth ain't a girl no more," reminded Sophie. "She looks awful young. But she was nineteen the year your daddy got married, and so she must be about thirty-three or so."

"My!" marveled Phœbe. "I thought she was twenty-five, maybe."

"Bein' a probation officer don't take it out of you like housework," reminded Sophie.

"But she doesn't *hate* Uncle Bob, does she?" went on Phœbe.

"Naw! Don't they see each other every day at the Court House?"

"But she doesn't come here any more. Why?"

Far down the street a man could be seen, slowly approaching. "Well, I've got to be trottin'," said Sophie, fixing her hair and giving a touch to hat and dress.

"If Uncle Bob likes her, and I like her, and you like her," argued Phœbe, "why doesn't she come?"

"Maybe she's tired at night. You know she works all day."

"She sat up with me after—Mother died. She wasn't tired then."

"Well, now, I'll tell you what's the matter. Everybody in town knows it, anyway. But you didn't hear it from me, mind y', if you happen to let it out——"

"I'll remember."

"Your Uncle Bob loves Miss Ruth, and he'd marry her if certain things wasn't a fact."

"What things?"

"Never mind. But this much I can tell y': Miss Ruth don't love your Uncle Bob, and she'll never marry him, for the plain and simple reason that she loves somebody else."

"Oh!—Who, Sophie?"

"Somebody that went and married somebody else," Sophie answered glumly. "And so Miss Ruth stayed single. And folks say her heart is broke——"

"Just like in the moving-pictures, Sophie!"

"Only it's a lot harder when it's real, and not make-believe."

"Some day maybe that man'll get free and come back to Miss Ruth," suggested Phœbe. "And then she'll marry him, and they'll be happy for the rest of their lives."

"No." Sophie shook her head with finality. "It

won't end that way. You see, the man Miss Ruth loves has got a brother that also happens to be in love with her."

"My, what a lot of gentlemen love Miss Ruth," marveled Phœbe. "Doesn't that make three?"

"Maybe. But the trouble is that the one brother just won't ever take her from the other brother, and so neither'll marry her. And I'm afraid the picture's goin' to end sad."

She started away. And presently Phœbe, watching, saw Sophie meet that man who had been slowly approaching in the distance. The man turned with Sophie, and the two disappeared down the long, tree-shaded street. The man, then, was Sophie's beau!

Phœbe turned homeward. The world was just full, she reflected, of good moving-pictures that no one seemed to be using.

CHAPTER XVI

To Phoebe, Uncle Bob took on a new and intense interest. Heretofore, he had been just Uncle Bob, stout and jolly and loving, with certain unknown duties at the Court House, and his various homely pastimes at home, such as gardening and puttering about the stable, and hunting worms. But now all at once he seemed different. And Phoebe forgot his stoutness and his baldness in remembering that he was the adoring, yet unhappy, lover. And just as she had watched her father's face for signs of suffering, she now watched this uncle, discovering sadness in his smiling blue eyes, and yearning even in his whistled tunes as he hammered away at the chicken-coop.

"He loves Miss Ruth," she pondered. She was doubly tender to him, knowing his secret. And just as she had vowed to thwart any plan of her father's to marry a second wife, she now gave time to a plot that would bring Miss Ruth to Grandma's.

Sophie discouraged the idea. "You can't make

Miss Ruth love your Uncle if she don't," she asserted. "And—she don't."

"I'm going to pray about it," resolved Phoebe, stoutly.

It meant a new ending to her bedside devotions. First there was that general plea to her Maker, which, she felt, kept her right in her own conscience and in the sight of her fellow-beings. Next came her whispered appeal to her mother, bringing that dear presence poignantly near. The final prayer was as simple as it was heartfelt: "Oh, God, please help Miss Ruth to love my Uncle Bob!"

Yet she never dared broach the matter to her uncle. Other things they discussed most confidentially; for instance, Uncle John.

"When I get educated," Phoebe wanted to know, "like Uncle John is, will I talk to people like he does, and make them sleepy?"

Uncle Bob roared with laughter, and slapped his knee. "That's a good one!" he cried. "And down at the Court House, sometimes when I talk a good deal *I* can put a lawyer to sleep."

"Lawyers are not nice people," Phoebe declared. "At least they're never very nice on the screen."

She asked him quite frankly about her program

of work. "Public school is out, and so is Miss Simpson's," she reminded him; "and here I am at lessons every morning."

"You'll be just so much ahead of everybody else," returned Uncle Bob. "And why waste the time? Pile up the good work while Daddy's gone. Now! now! What's that? A little tear?"

Phœbe nodded. "Lately, when I shut my eyes, I can't see Daddy's face any more. He seems such a long way off. Just see where Peru is on the map!"

"I know, darling. It's hard."

She looked around—to make sure they were alone. "If—if I only had my mother," she whispered. "Uncle Bob, are there a lot of girls in the world without mothers?"

He nodded. "Too many."

"Sometimes it seems as if I can't stand it," she confessed. "My throat twists up,—right here—and it aches. I wake in the night, and I pretend that she's close to me——"

"Maybe she is."

"No; because I hold out my arms."

Uncle Bob drew her close. "Ah, you're lonely!"

"I want my mother," whispered Phœbe. "Oh, Uncle Bob, I want my mother!"

"There! There!" he comforted.

"She died out there alone! Did you all hate her?"

"No! No!"

"What did my mother do that was so bad?"

He made her stand in front of him. "Phœbe," he began solemnly, "shall I tell you the truth?"

"I want to know."

"And if I tell you the truth, you'll never worry about it again?"

"No, I won't, Uncle Bob."

"The truth is this:"—looking at her squarely—"your mother just *couldn't* do wrong."

"I love you," faltered Phœbe, glad and grateful and on the verge of tears—all at the same time.

"If I could only give you back your mother!" went on Uncle Bob, huskily. "To make you happy, there isn't anything I wouldn't do—not anything."

His big chin rested upon his tie. He lost himself in thought, his eyes on the carpet,—they were in the library—his arm about Phœbe.

And then she was reminded all at once of that which could make him happy. For Sophie burst in, her over-curved hair lifting with the speed of

her coming, and her eyes dancing with something like mischief.

"Miss Shepard's callin', Judge," she announced.

"Ah!" Uncle Bob sprang up.

"Miss Ruth!" cried Phœbe, joyously.

"Ask Miss Shepard in here, Sophie," bade Uncle Bob. Then, as Sophie swung herself out, "You love Miss Ruth very much, don't you, Phœbe?"

"Yes," answered Phœbe. And then, before she could stop the words, for she was thinking aloud, "So do you."

"Wha-a-at?" exclaimed Uncle Bob.

"People say so," defended Phœbe, a little frightened at her own temerity.

Uncle Bob's face grew suddenly stern. "That's gossip," he said shortly.

"I'm sorry."

He strode to Uncle John's table and back; then, "That's all right, old dumpling. Now you go in to Grandma. And remember that Uncle Bob's going to try to do something that'll make his dear Phœbe happy. He's going to try right away—soon—today. For he's got a plan—a wonderful plan——"

It was Miss Ruth who cut him short. She en-

tered quickly, a little out of breath. And she was pale. "Judge, I'm sorry to trouble you——"

"You never trouble me." How deep Uncle Bob's voice could be! Phœbe was standing beside Miss Ruth, her hand in a firm, cool, loving clasp. She watched her uncle narrowly, seeing that what Sophie had told her was true.

"Judge, it's Manila," announced Miss Ruth.

"What's wrong?" asked Uncle Bob.

"Mr. Botts is drinking again. And so—well, you know my neighbor on the other side? She's very close to the Botts's. And they've got that child locked up, in a room on this side——"

Phœbe drew away from Miss Ruth, and stared up at her. "In prison!" she murmured. Here was another drama, more startling even than this one which concerned Miss Ruth and Uncle Bob's unrequited love.

Miss Ruth was appealing to Uncle Bob. "My neighbors can hear Manila crying—they heard her in the night, and this morning, too, while it was still dark. Oh, Judge, they say there's no bed in that room——"

Uncle Bob straightened determinedly. "We've got to take that child," he declared.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that!" cried Miss Ruth. "Poor, unhappy——"

But Phœbe heard no more. For an idea had come to her, and she had decided to act upon it. Manila was locked up by her cruel step-mother—exactly like some unfortunate waif in a moving-picture story! Uncle Bob meant that Manila should be set free.

"And I'm going to do it," vowed Phœbe.

She made for the hall door.

CHAPTER XVII

ALL the moving-picture heroines that Phoebe loved were responsible for her resolve to rescue Manila. The plan seemed an inspiration; and not in the least degree blameworthy—on the contrary. When had she seen one of her screen favorites do anything, however startling, that had brought disaster, or punishment—even displeasure? Quite naturally, therefore, Phoebe apprehended only success in her venture, happiness for Manila, and praise for herself.

She thrilled with the excitement of the venture as she set off from the Blair side-porch. Here was a real heart drama!

As she trotted across the lawn and through the garden, Phoebe made up her mind as to how she would carry out her design. Once, in a book she had read, a boy had stealthily attracted the attention of another boy by throwing pebbles against a window. She determined to throw pebbles against Manila's window.

She knew which was the Botts house by beginning at the Shepard residence and counting three. Manila's home was of brick, with white trimmings and green blinds. The window toward Miss Ruth's was not high from the ground, and it was just above a recently spaded flower-bed. When Phœbe reached the fence that skirted the flower-bed, she gathered a handful of small gravel, tossed it against the window-panes, and then crouched in the lee of the fence. Her heart was pounding against her middy blouse—pounding wildly. She was glad of it. In a matter of this kind that was precisely what a moving picture heroine's heart should do!

More small gravel. Then a face appeared at the window—Manila's face. And Manila's pale eyes looked out, and roved inquiringly. But only for a moment. She had something in her hands—a pair of scissors; also some paper. She was busy with these.

Phœbe felt disappointment. Manila was not living up to expectations, to the possibilities of the drama. She should have come flinging against the glass, glad and thankful of a rescuer. Her face should have been very wan, and tear-stained. Her hair should have been free about her shoulders.

There should have been a long purple welt across one poor, pitiful cheek.

Instead, Manila's hair was braided, but very mussy. It stood up around her forehead like a fiery fringe. Phœbe was reminded of savage girls that she had seen at the showing of the Roosevelt South American pictures.

"St! St!" she hissed. She stood up, but stooped. She was determined that she, at least, would do *her* share toward carrying out the whole thing properly, to make it like a real picture.

Manila saw her, and hoisted the window. "Hullo," she greeted, with one eye on the work in her hands. "What're you doin' out there?"

"Manila Botts," cried Phœbe, crossly, "I have come to save you!"

Manila, hanging upon the window-sill, thrust out her under lip rebelliously. "But I'm cutting paper dolls," she protested.

"Manila Botts!" scolded Phœbe, with a stamp of her foot. "Uncle Bob means to take you away from your step-mother, and I've come to get you. Now, are you going to act like this?"

Patiently Manila dropped scissors and paper. Then she disposed herself sidewise, face down, upon

the sill, let one leg drop over it leisurely, next, another, and slipped quietly to the ground. A moment later Phœbe drew her through a gap in the fence.

Manila seemed not only indifferent, but even reluctant, about being rescued. As for gratitude, there was not a trace of it. As the two made off together along the tradesmen's dirt road that ran behind the row of houses, she pointed out now one thing, and now another, in a way that made Phœbe more irritated than ever.

"But haven't you been locked up?" Phœbe wanted to know; "and in a room without a bed?"

"Aw, well," returned Manila, philosophically, "you betcha I wouldn't let Mrs. Botts know I cared."

When the rear gate leading to the Blair house was reached, Manila began to hang back. "Wisht I didn't come," she declared.

"Wha-a-at?" Phœbe stopped short.

"I'm scairt," confided Manila.

"Scared nothing!" Phœbe said stoutly, slamming the gate behind them. "You're with us now."

"Mrs. Botts told me, 'Don't you budge'."

"You don't have to mind her any more. After this you mind just me."

"She won't let me."

"She can't help herself. Because I'm going to adopt you. You're going to be—let me see! I don't know which, my sister or my daughter."

Manila halted and pulled back. "Phœbe, she'll come after me."

"Don't you worry. I've seen lots worse than her."

"*Worse'n* her?" repeated Manila, incredulous.

"In the pictures. And I've noticed that the hero or the heroine always comes out ahead."

Manila allowed herself to be led across the rear lawn toward the Blair house, but she was not convinced. "This ain't no movie," she reminded.

"It's better than a movie," asserted Phœbe, "because it's honest-to-goodness true!"

Manila looked back over a shoulder. Her concern was growing fast. "But what if she seen us run away?"

Phœbe was turning a corner on her way to the library windows. The library windows were low of sill. At this season of the year they were wide open. Of course all the outer doors of the house

were open, too,—at least they were not locked. But Phœbe had no intention of entering her home in any prosaic fashion. No, indeed. Heroines of the screen always made their exits and entrances romantically. She meant to carry out this drama in true moving-picture fashion.

She lowered her voice. "Who cares?" she demanded scornfully. "It was all just perfect. There was the window, and the ladder——"

"Ladder?" challenged Manila.

"Well, what was better, you threw yourself out. You are the prisoner, Manila, and I'm the heroine. —My, if only somebody could've come by with a kodak!"

They crept along by the wall. Manila was sniffing. Phœbe eyed her approvingly. This was better—the proper spirit.

"Sh! Sh!" cautioned Phœbe.

They arrived, bent over, under a window. Phœbe slowly straightened and spied out the ground. The library was empty. Good! She gave a hop, landed on mid-torso across the sill, gave a wriggle, and stood safely within. "Now!" she whispered cautiously, putting forth a hand.

Manila was weeping in good earnest. "She told

me, 'Don't you budge'." But she took Phœbe's hand.

When the two were side by side once more, Phœbe was all tender sympathy. She felt that Manila was really acting very well. At first the latter had given the impression that, after all, Mrs. Botts was not so bad as she had been painted. But of course she was! And this drama was promising excitement.

Manila sought the nearest chair. "Wa-a-ah," she wept.

"Poor little girl!" said Phœbe, stroking the red hair. "If only we had our mothers—both of us. Manila, do you suppose our mothers are together in Heaven?" Then with a glance at the woe-begone figure, "Well, perhaps not exactly together, but close by. Perhaps my mother is in a mansion all of precious stones, and your mother—your mother is walking along the streets of gold."

Manila cast up one eye, the other being hidden under a damp fist. "How do y' know?" she asked.

"Uncle John tells me," condescended Phœbe. "Uncle John's a clergyman, and he knows all about Heaven. The twelve gates of the City are twelve

pearls,' he says. Oh, Manila, if you and I could only go to Heaven to our mothers!"

Manila stood up. "Where is Heaven?" she asked hopefully, as one who is of a mind to set off forthwith.

"Where? Well, I don't know exactly. That's one thing I forgot to ask Uncle John."

Manila's face fell. And her eyes, roving, lit upon the nearby globe. She pointed. "Can't y' find it on the world?" she suggested.

"On *that*?" cried Phœbe.

"Look for it!"

Phœbe gave Manila's arm a soothing pat. Then with a shake of the head, "Poor little girl, don't you know that Heaven isn't on the globe? And I've never even seen it in the movies."

Manila sat down.

"I know what's inside," confided Phœbe. "That's the bad place, where we go if we kill anybody, and if we tell lies. It's awful hot there, Uncle John says, and we burn and burn. Oh, Uncle John knows everything religious."

There was something about all this that made Manila's courage sink, for once more she fell to weeping.

"Manila!" pleaded Phœbe. "Everybody says that Heaven is—look!" She pointed ceilingward.

"Up in your house?" faltered Manila.

"No! Somewhere in the sky."

"How do we get there? Airplanes?"

"The minute you die, Manila, you're an angel, and you grow wings."

"I don't wanta die!"

Phœbe put her arms about the shaking figure. "There! There!" she comforted. "What you need is mothering. *I* know. It's what I want when I feel blue. Manila, I'm going to mother you."

And then—! Up to now Phœbe had felt that from the standpoint of drama there had been not a little lacking in this rescue of an imprisoned step-daughter. She was to feel this no longer. For the exciting now took place.

Phœbe never did quite figure out how it happened. But first there was a quick slamming of doors, and a shrilling of voices—Sophie's, Grand-ma's, and another, a strange woman's. Then as Manila leaped from Phœbe's hold, the door opened with a fling, so that the window-curtains billowed and swung, and into the room, stamping and panting, with eyes bulging and lips puffed out, and a

very torrent of threatening cries, came the Rat-Woman!

Phœbe knew her instantly, even before Manila cried "Mrs. Botts!" And Phœbe faced her, bravely, with dislike and reproof in her look. Crouched behind her was Manila, sobbing wildly.

"So-o-o!" cried the Rat-Woman, advancing upon Phœbe. "I find out if someone can come into my house to steal!"

Uncle Bob had entered behind her. He was smiling, hands in pockets. "Nonsense!" he retorted. "Who would steal Manila. You've been hard on this poor child again, and she simply took to her heels."

"I tell her, 'Don't you budge'," cried Mrs. Botts. (Phœbe noted that there was an accent, slight, but enough to give what Phœbe thought was the perfect touch. This was no ordinary villain!)

"Phœbe," said Uncle Bob, mildly, "how does Manila happen to be here?"

"Tell! Yes!" added Mrs. Botts, wrathfully. "I hear about this Phœbe. She is smart. She knows everything."

Phœbe drew herself up. "Well, I know *one* thing," she returned coolly.

"Ye-e-es! And what?" Mrs. Botts folded her arms and hung her weight on one foot.

"I know that all step-mothers are cruel."

Out leaped Mrs. Botts's arms. She swept around upon the Judge. "You hear it?" she demanded. "You hear it? She is permitted to insult me!"

It was not to be denied that Mrs. Botts was doing her part to make the whole thing really dramatic. Phoebe had to give her credit for that.

"Phoebe?"—Uncle Bob was as mild as ever.

Phoebe wished that she might have had a different tale to tell. If only she had thought to gag Manila, and tie her hands! If only she could tell of, say, a kidnapping plot, of a great, black limousine, and Mexicans with knives! But——

"Well, Uncle Bob," she began calmly, "I did go over and get her. Miss Ruth told us she was crying. Well, she wasn't. She was cutting paper dolls. Anyhow, I stole her, and she's cried a lot since. Uncle John says I'm too big for dolls, so I intend to adopt her."

"Adopt her!" exploded Uncle Bob.

"Oh, just look at her!" implored Phoebe. "She's had *such* bad luck!—a step-mother, and the awful

name of Botts, and she's red-haired, and freckled, and she's got adenoids!"

Mrs. Botts sprang forward. "So-o-o!" she answered. "She is like that. But she can mind her own business. And she does not talk too much. She might be worse—as bad as you!"

"Phœbe," said Uncle Bob. He crossed to her, anxiously Phœbe thought.

"You are a little thief!" Mrs. Botts stuck a fist close to Phœbe's nose. "And I will have you arrested! The whole town knows about you. Miss Simpson, she——"

Uncle Bob put a hand over each of Phœbe's ears then, shutting out that shrill voice. Once Phœbe heard "school," and twice she heard "your mother." Then Mrs. Botts flung herself away and out.

"What did she say, Uncle Bob?" asked Phœbe. "What did you cover my ears for? What did she say?"

Uncle Bob did not reply. He was white with rage. He went to the door and looked through. "Sophie, put that vixen out!" he ordered.

Now that Mrs. Botts was gone, Manila was

tearless once more. "My goodness!" she mourned, "now we've done it!"

"What?" asked Phœbe.

"Why, don't y' see? The Rat-Woman come too soon."

"Sure enough!" Phœbe agreed. "Oh, that's too bad!"

"And your paw don't git to see her," Manila added.

"Phœbe, why did you want your daddy to see her?" asked Uncle Bob.

"Oh, just be-because," Phœbe frowned at Manila, warning her to silence.

Uncle Bob sat down upon the couch. "Come here, old dumpling," he bade. And when Phœbe had gone to him, "Now, because why?"

"I don't want to tell you," she confessed frankly.

"But I'd really like to know."

She hesitated. "If I tell you, you won't laugh?" she asked.

"I won't laugh," promised Uncle Bob, gravely.

"Because I want Daddy to see how mean and terrible step-mothers are," explained Phœbe. "We were going to show him Mrs. Botts. And now the whole plot is spoiled."

"So you think step-mothers are mean and terrible," said Uncle Bob. And there was not even a glimmer of a smile in his eyes. On the contrary—he looked actually troubled!

All that she had longed to say to her father now surged to Phœbe's lips. She dropped beside her uncle, and clung to him. "Oh, I don't want a step-mother!" she cried. "Oh, Uncle Bob, help me! Keep Daddy from getting married again! You will, won't you? A step-mother would whip me, and wear Mother's clothes, and make Daddy hate me! Oh, Uncle Bob, you *don't* think Daddy will bring one home?"

"Darling baby," he said tenderly, "I know your Daddy won't bring one home."

"Oh, not a Peru woman!" pleaded Phœbe. "I don't want one!"

"Don't you worry. No Peru woman is going to get him."

"But I don't want *anybody*," she persisted. "Oh, Uncle Bob!"

That was all. Except that when Phœbe had gone to Miss Ruth's with Manila, and was nearing home again, Grandma came out to meet her.

And Grandma was particularly tender to her, for some reason, and that very evening sat beside Phœbe's bed for a little while, and chatted.

And from then on—Phœbe could not help but notice it—Grandma seemed to take great interest in Phœbe, to be with her often, to make her little presents, and buy her little things, and say so much to her that was sweet. For which reason Phœbe came to understand Grandma better, and daily their love for each other grew.

CHAPTER XVIII

"You can't tell anything by the way a day starts," philosophized Phœbe, as she unlaced her shoes preparatory to going to bed; "because a wonderful day starts exactly like an ordinary one."

The day had indeed started ordinarily enough—with the usual routine: breakfast, twenty minutes in the open air, then an hour equally divided between spelling and sums. Next Uncle John "heard" the spelling, and looked over the sums; after which, settling himself in a big, comfortable chair by a window,—his back to Phœbe—he listened while she read aloud from Dickens's "Child's History of England."

Phœbe liked the reading aloud best. Because she had discovered that if she would read quietly, and in one tone, Uncle John could be counted upon to fall asleep during the first ten minutes. Whereupon Phœbe, with "Little Women" handy, or "Sara Crewe," or, better still, something by "The Duch-

ess", was able to change from the History to a story without in any way disturbing Uncle John.

When Uncle John was finished with his after-breakfast sleep (Sophie confided to Phœbe that it was his liver), he invariably wakened with a start, pretending that he had not been dozing at all, said "Yes, yes, yes," as he got up, and "Very well, dear child," as he crossed to the table and his work, and Phœbe was then at liberty either to go on reading from the book of her choice or betake herself elsewhere.

But this was to be a wonderful day. For no sooner was Phœbe engrossed in her book, as her clergyman uncle was in his sermon, than Sophie appeared, looking flushed and important. She made toward the big table with a swish of her starched skirts. She bent to whisper something. Whereat Dr. Blair sprang up with a joyful exclamation and strode out.

It so happened that Phœbe was reading "Airy, Fairy Lillian". On Sophie's entrance she had quickly closed that fascinating volume and slipped it between her back and the chair, then folded her hands thoughtfully in her lap; not that she feared to let Sophie know what she was reading—as a

matter of fact it was Sophie who had recommended "The Duchess" books, and pointed out the place of their hiding. But Phœbe knew that whenever Uncle John was roused out of the strange, dazed—almost cataleptic!—condition into which he fell when he worked, he was more likely than not to take stock of everything about him. And Phœbe did not care to have him see "Airy, Fairy Lillian".

Uncle John gone, Sophie did a hop-skip to Phœbe's chair. "What d' y' think!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Phœbe looked up languidly. Secretly she was annoyed at Sophie's interruption, for the exquisite *Lillian* (a sort of novelized Marguerite Clark) had just sprained her slender, silken-covered ankle, and a lover fully as handsome as Dustin Farnum was about to take *Lillian* up in his strong young arms.

"What?" she inquired politely.

Sophie bent, put a hand on each knee, and beamed into Phœbe's eyes. "Comp'ny," she announced.

"Company? Who?" Phœbe was more than interested.

"Genevieve Finnegan."

Phœbe made a wry face. "Her!" she said, and flushed.

"I pretended I didn't know her," chuckled Sophie.

Phœbe was suspicious. "What do you think she's come for?" she asked.

"Can't say." Sophie straightened and shrugged.

"Maybe she's going to tell me they're all sorry for putting me out of school," suggested Phœbe.

"You're right! Because Miss Simpson come with her."

"Miss—Simpson!" gasped Phœbe, staring.

"In the sittin'-room with Grammaw and Dr. Blair."

Phœbe stood up. The bow on the front of her middy-blouse rose and fell. Her eyes swam. It was all very well to be independent, to say she did not want friends or acquaintances. But she had lived through scores of dull days—days that were all the harder to endure because she was a product of a metropolis. She had not even seen as much of Manila as she would have liked. Miss Ruth, too, came only when she had to. And when Uncle Bob had suggested asking little girls in,

Phœbe had proudly said no—but said it with a bursting heart.

But now the time was come when she could stand out against her loneliness no longer. “Oh, Sophie! Sophie!” she cried, clasping her hands. “It’s just splendid! No more tutoring with Uncle John! Oh, how I hate it! No more Dickens’s ‘Child’s History of England,’ or these awful classics! Miss Simpson’s come to ask me——”

She paused. It was the look on Sophie’s face that made her pause. Resentment was written large on that countenance framed by the tousled hair. Phœbe understood the resentment. She shared it. “But she didn’t want me when my mother was—West,” she said.

Sophie’s arms were folded. “Now, you’re talk-in’!” she replied admiringly. “When you *needed* these fine ladies, they didn’t stand by y’.”

Phœbe nodded. “I know. I’ve thought about it lots since my mother died. And I know there was something the matter. She looked down at the carpet, restraining herself from questioning Sophie. What was it that Mrs. Botts had said—while Uncle Bob covered Phœbe’s ears? Something very ugly, Phœbe was sure. And Phœbe would have liked to

ask now, yet shrank as ever from discussing her mother with a servant. But Uncle Bob had said that Mother could not do wrong——

"Sophie!" she whispered. "*I* hadn't done anything, had I? And Miss Simpson sent home my books!" Her voice broke. She sank to the chair.

"Phœbe," said Sophie, gently. Then to rouse her, "Keep your chin up, Kiddie! Don't you let that Finnegan girl see that you care!"

"I don't care," protested Phœbe, with spirit. "You just watch me! Go on—bring her in. I'm ready!" She caught up a volume of Scott from where she had deposited it when *Lillian* had proved the more enthralling.

"Ha-ha-a-a-a!" chortled Sophie, proudly. With a toss of her head, she went out.

Phœbe opened her book at random. Perhaps it was even upside down—she scarcely knew. However it was, she became intensely engrossed in it, so that she did not even glance up when the door to the hall opened and Sophie returned.

"I found her, Miss Finnegan," announced Sophie, in her best receiving manner.

"Phœbe!" gushed Miss Finnegan. She burst past

Sophie. "Phœbe! You *darling!* Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

Phœbe let her book drop, still open, to her knees. Very carefully she put one forefinger on the line she was supposed to be reading. Then she raised eyes that had in them mild surprise, and just a trace of sweet bewilderment.

"Oh! How do you do," she answered politely; and got up. "Please excuse me. I—I get so interested in my books. This is 'Kenilworth,' by Sir Walter Scott. Of course you've read it."

"'Kenilworth'?" said Genevieve. "Why, no."

"You haven't?" returned Phœbe, shocked. "Oh, my, that's too bad. After a while, when you're grown up, you'll wish you'd read it. A girl can't be just fluffy. And a woman mustn't be fluffy. We must know things, and we must be wise and—and as much like Miss Ruth Shepard as we can possibly be."

Genevieve blinked, trying to comprehend this onrush of ideas.

Phœbe put her head on one side and smiled. "Oh, I *do* so enjoy the classics," she declared.

It was Genevieve's turn to be bewildered. "The—classics?" she echoed. "What are the classics?"

Phœbe knit her brows. "Why, they're—they're—well, just the most important thing. My Uncle John says 'The classics are the foundation of culture'."

"Is that so?" pondered Genevieve. "Well, I'd better put 'em down. What did you call 'em? 'Kenilworth'?" She drew a handsome leather notebook from the richly embroidered handbag on her arm. "Because Mamma says, 'Germans or no Germans, with our name we just got to have culture'." She touched her tongue with the tip of a slender gold pencil and wrote.

Sophie, backed against the hall-door, shook with silent laughter. As Phœbe glanced her way, roguishly, Sophie noiselessly applauded, and signalled Phœbe to continue her tactics.

Phœbe assumed the grand air. "I suppose you've heard about my father?" she began again.

"In Peru, ain't he— isn't he?" asked Genevieve.

"It's South America," said Phœbe. "Only a few people ever go there. Daddy is such a wonderful mining engineer that they just had to have him."

Genevieve put away her notes. "Well, I suppose now, the first thing you know, your father'll be getting married."

Phœbe turned white. All the grand air went, leaving her staring almost wildly. "Married!" she breathed. "My—father——"

Genevieve smiled with gratification. Her shot had gone home. "Mamma says," she went on blandly, "that since this war, with so many men killed off, why, a man that ain't—I should say isn't—married don't stand a chance."

Phœbe flung "Kenilworth" down. "Oh, but he wouldn't!" she cried. "No! I don't want to lose him!"

Sophie was at her side in an instant. "Darlin', don't you believe it! He loves you, and just nobody else." Then marching up to Genevieve, angrily, with hands on hips, "Say! What did you come here today for, anyhow?"

Genevieve lifted her shoulders with disdain. "Mamma says," she returned calmly, "that you can tell whether people are nice or not by their servants."

"Y' can!" taunted Sophie. "Well, 'Mammaw' sure oughta know. Because Bridget Finnegan was oncet a servant."

Genevieve's face darkened. Her neck appeared to swell. "Well, I can tell you this much," she an-

answered hotly. "There are some things my mother *wasn't*. People have never said that she——"

"Here!" stormed Sophie. She caught Genevieve by a shoulder.

"Sophie!" gasped Phœbe, appalled.

But Sophie did not hear. "Now, you run along," she ordered, showing Genevieve toward the door. "Do y' understand?"

Genevieve went haughtily. "I wouldn't stay for anything," she declared. "I'll wait for Miss Simpson in my motor."

"When y' got your motor," sneered Sophie, "what a *pity* y' didn't get some manners!"

Genevieve ignored her. "Good-bye, Phœbe," she said, from the door. "I don't believe us Simpson girls will see you again at school."

"I'm dead sure you won't!" cried Sophie, and slammed the door in Genevieve's face.

Phœbe sighed. "Now, she'll make Miss Simpson hate me," she said sadly. "And so will all the girls, and they won't take me back——"

"Take you back!" raged Sophie. "After they sent you packin' home that time? Where's your pride? If it was me, I just wouldn't *go* back. And your uncles and your paw won't let y' when they

hear what I tell 'em!—Phœbe, you show Miss Simpson that you don't want her old school. You turn *her* down—first!"

Phœbe rallied herself. She realized that Sophie was speaking the truth. The quarrel with Genevieve—and especially what Genevieve had just said (Phœbe was aware of an inference there), made her see that the last bridge was burned between her and the Simpson School. So she might as well show indifference to the visiting Principal, whose voice, even now, could be heard from the direction of the sitting-room.

"All right, Sophie," she whispered bravely. "Don't you worry."

She caught up "Kenilworth" once more, tucked herself into a corner of the big couch, rested her head in a scholarly pose upon one hand, and lost herself between the pages of Sir Walter Scott.

CHAPTER XIX

"DARLING Phœbe," gushed Miss Simpson, "how do you do!"

"How do you do," responded Phœbe, rising politely.

"It's so *nice* to see you again," went on the Principal. "Oh, my dear, we've missed you so much!"

"Thank you."

Such straight looking out of those frank eyes, and such cool poise, was most disconcerting. Miss Simpson, with a smile that was wholly muscular, changed the subject by bending down to Phœbe's book. "'Kenilworth?'" she cried in delighted surprise. "Do you enjoy it, Phœbe?"

"I love it," answered Phœbe, with quiet sincerity. "Every day I read it with Uncle John—Sir Walter Scott in twelve volumes."

Miss Simpson turned to Grandma, waiting and smiling and nodding her white head at the far end of the library table. "Dr. Blair must be such a great help to Phœbe," she declared.

"Oh, he is." Phœbe did not wait for Grandma. "Uncle John is my tutor, and I like having a tutor."

Miss Simpson fell back a step, as at some new and disconcerting thought. "Do you, dear?" she murmured, and sank, still staring at Phœbe, to a convenient chair.

"I do," returned Phœbe. "You know princesses always have governesses and tutors. I've seen them in the movies."

"The movies!" exclaimed Miss Simpson.

"But Phœbe doesn't go to them," said Grandma, quickly. "Dear Phœbe, you know you don't."

Phœbe remembered what Sophie had said about keeping one's chin up. She raised hers now. "I used to," she reminded. "So I know. And Uncle John and I are reading Dickens's 'Child's History of England'—it's a wonderful book. Oh, we've got a whole year's work planned out."

Miss Simpson sat back, swallowed, glanced right and left—then broke forth in a smile that was meant to be warmly diplomatic. "I see," she cooed. "But I've come today, Phœbe, because—ah—er—I'm calling on all of my pupils for the Fall term, and so——"

Up went Phœbe's chin another inch. She re-

turned the diplomatic smile. "But, Miss Simpson," she protested pleasantly, "I wouldn't change my tutor for anything. Uncle Bob says a tutor is ever so much more stylish than a private school."

Miss Simpson's face set. She rose as if propelled upward by a spring. "However," she said icily, "a private school might be of great value to you. It might help to eradicate the effect of your moving-picture training, and teach you that nice little girls are never loquacious." Now she revolved toward Phœbe's grandmother. "Where, I wonder, is dear Genevieve?" she inquired.

"Grandma," said Phœbe, "Genevieve didn't seem to care a bit for this wonderful 'Kenilworth', so she's outside."

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Blair." Miss Simpson extended a long arm.

"But you'll have a cup of tea, won't you, Miss Simpson?"—Grandma was following her guest, who was even now at the hall door. "The Judge will be home, and he'll be so glad to see you, and——" Miss Simpson was already in the hall; Grandma went with her, closing the door upon the straight-standing, angry little figure at the middle of the library floor.

"Yes, have a cup of tea, Miss Simpson!" cried Phœbe, wrathful. "The Judge'll be home and he *won't* be glad to see you! You'll take me back, now that my mother's dead! Well, you won't! I'll read the classics first! Scott!"—she whirled "Kenilworth" to the sofa—"And History! And anything!" Whereat she flung herself bodily atop the book and the sofa, buried her face in a cushion and wept.

"Phœbe!" It was Sophie, come to hear the results of the Simpson visit. "Whatever is the matter?"

Phœbe sat up. "Lots of things," she declared. "This house—it never gets any smaller. And everybody grown up. And, oh, think of having Uncle John six days of the week at home and twice at church on Sunday!"

Sophie laughed. "Don't blame y'," she confided. "But I hope you said No to her." She jerked her head toward the hall.

"I did." Phœbe got up. Rebellion flamed in her cheeks. "But, Sophie, there's one thing sure. Something's got to happen: Public school or the movies!"

"Land sakes!" gasped Sophie. "Don't you know your folks'll never let you go to public school?"

"They won't?" Phœbe went close to Sophie, and lowered her voice. "Then it's the movies," she declared. "I'm not going to stand things any more. I'm going to see some pictures and I'm going with you!"

"Phœbe Blair!"

"My mother took me. It isn't wrong."

"But the folks! If they ketch us——" Sophie threw up both hands.

"They won't. They think I'm asleep at nine o'clock. We can go just before that, and see a picture when it's on for the second time. We can steal down the back stairs—I'll carry my shoes. Oh, Sophie, will you do it? Say Yes! I haven't seen a picture for months!"

"We-e-ell,"—Sophie was visibly weakening—"I might. Because I think you're kept in too close. And that ain't good for any kid."

"Oh, I want to see just one more five-reeler!" pleaded Phœbe.

"If I take y' just once?" Sophie held up a finger.

Phœbe had won. She threw her arms about Sophie, almost smothering her. "Darling Sophie!

Oh, Sophie, you're a girl, and you understand!—
Oh, Sophie, who's the star I'll see tonight?"

Sophie half turned away. She raised ecstatic eyes to the neighborhood of Uncle John's Map of Palestine. She sighed. "William S. Hart," she half whispered.

"William S. Hart," repeated Phœbe. She echoed the sigh.

"Oh, he's grand!" breathed Sophie.

Phœbe touched Sophie with an anxious hand. "What girl is playing with him now?" she asked jealously.

"I don't remember. But"—enviously—"she's awful pretty."

"Does he—like her?" went on Phœbe.

"Oh, he's crazy about her!"

"Mm!" Phœbe considered the toe of a shoe. Now and again, in the case of this particular star, she had dreamed dreams. She had looked forward to a time when her hair would be up and her dresses longer; then, if her plans worked out satisfactorily, might *she* not be a moving-picture actress, and play with her favorite hero?

"When he told her how he loved her," mused

Sophie, almost as if to herself, "and asked her to be his bride——"

Phœbe came back to sad realities. "How did he ask her?" she wanted to know.

"She was settin'," recounted Sophie. "He come close, and looked at her. She dropped her eyes; so he reached over and took her hand. Next, down he went on one knee. 'Dear little woman,'—that's what it read in print—'let us ride into the sunset together!'" Sophie gestured, indicating a possible sunset.

"But did she say Yes?" inquired Phœbe, impatiently.

"Well, not just at first. She kinda hung off——"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Phœbe, incredulous. She walked to and fro, head down.

"But think of it! A gang of Indians come scootin' up to the Ranch. And he fought 'em all, and saved her. So she took him, and he kissed her——!"

Phœbe paused. It seemed to her then as if she were to be penned up forever in this small town which she so hated; as if she would never grow up, and be able to say what she would do; as if

other girls—this William S. Hart girl, for instance—simply had everything. In an excess of resentment she went up to Uncle John's favorite arm-chair—and kicked it!

CHAPTER XX

"PHŒBE, dear," cried Uncle John, "I am the happiest of men!"

Phoebe was killing time—yet pleasantly, with the aid of "Airy, Fairy Lillian." She kept it boldly in her lap as this more formidable of her uncles paused beside her chair. She was not rebellious now, but she was determined. Of course Uncle John would be horrified if he were to know about her plans for the coming evening. So he might just as well be shocked not so completely by what he would surely regard as a frivolous book. Well, let him be shocked!

But he did not look at the book. "Grandma has just told me," he added.

"Yes?" encouraged Phoebe, anxious to return to *Lillian*.

"Oh, it has warmed my heart," he declared; "—to hear that you really like my teaching, and the literature that we've enjoyed together. And that

you'd rather stay with me than go back to Miss Simpson's."

"Yes, I would."

"Blessed little student!" He said it lovingly. And—wonder of wonders!—he leaned down and kissed Phœbe's hair!

After he was gone, Phœbe sat for a long while, thinking. Uncle John had been unusually kind and tender to her—just at the wrong time! In all the past months, when had he ever thought to do more than give her an absent-minded pat? Why then was he being so nice all at once, so that her conscience hurt her?

She felt resentment toward Uncle John.

She considered, too, his hatred of the "movies". He had his church, in which he was supreme. He could get up at stated intervals and talk as much as he liked, and who dared interrupt him? He had music, as well, and processions. And he was paid for all this (Sophie declared him to be the best-paid clergyman in town), when, so far as Phœbe could see, he was thoroughly enjoying himself all the time! Writing a sermon was not work. Making calls on people was not work. It was all a

weird, not-to-be-understood form of grown-up pleasure.

Then why should he interfere in what *she* thought was having a good time?

"He sha'n't," she said firmly.

Other things happened that afternoon which made Uncle John's conduct seem part of a conspiracy. For here came Grandma, bringing an apple-turnover. Phœbe particularly liked apple-turnovers. As she munched this one, letting the flakes of a deliciously rich crust fall upon the pages of "The Duchess", she could not help but wonder if Sophie had not, for some reason, confessed the plot for that night, with the result that Grandma was resorting to bribery!

Next, Uncle Bob appeared. He had an oblong box in one hand. The box was elaborately tied with blue ribbon. It was chocolates, and they followed the fate of the turnover. No one had a word to say about supper, or Phœbe's possible lack of appetite for it. She ate, and she read her novel openly. And—her conscience hurt more and more!

But darkness, the love of adventure, and a thirst for her favorite delight, helped her to feel indifference. Sophie was on the back porch when Phœbe

came stealing down. Not a word was spoken as the latter sat on the bottom step to put on her shoes. The stars were out, the air was soft. When finally, hand in hand, they stole toward the back gate, the perfume of Grandma's flower-beds gave place to the friendly odors of chicken-coop and stable, and they knew they were safe.

"Now," said Sophie triumphantly, as the gate shut softly behind them.

"It's like a regular movie," whispered Phœbe. She danced up and down.

When they reached the theatre, they went warily. They waited in the foyer till the lights were lowered, after which they fairly stole into their chairs, in the last row. Here, shoulder to shoulder, with an occasional anxious glance about them, they sat through the program.

Just before the end of the last picture, Sophie touched Phœbe, motioning her to follow. They sought the foyer once more, and saw the end of the evening story from a position by the door. Then as the audience rose, out the pair flew, heads down, to the sidewalk.

Phœbe had not spoken while she was in the

theatre. Now and then she had looked up at Sophie, or squeezed her arm gratefully. She was afraid of attracting attention to herself. But out in the open air she burst forth gaily. The gay music, the accustomed entertainment she loved, the excitement of again being part of a crowd, all combined to make her feel that she was back once more among the old, happy days. With Sally, she had been free to come and go. She loved freedom.

Something curious happened just after she and Sophie left the theatre. At first, while they were in the more crowded part of the town, Phœbe did not notice anything—she was too busy chattering. But when they were farther out toward the Blair Addition, Phœbe realized that a man was walking rather close behind them, crossing a street when they crossed it, turning corners when they turned. As they were nearly home the man suddenly came abreast of them, and greeted Sophie. And he seemed to be a very good friend of Sophie's, for he took her arm.

At the rear gate, Phœbe went on a few steps alone, and then halted to wait. She was not near enough to catch what the man and Sophie said: she could hear only the murmur of their voices.

Overhead the stars were low and bright. The trees swayed in the night wind. Yet Phœbe was not thrilled. She did not feel that romance was in the air—not romance such as "Airy, Fairy Lillian" held—not by any means the kind of romance that she had just enjoyed at the theatre. She wished only that Sophie would not be silly, and would hurry up. It was late. Phœbe dreaded the climb in the dark to her room.

But no feeling either of fear or remorse troubled her as she prepared for bed. She had gained her room without discovery. And as it would never occur to any one of the family to suspect that she might steal out of an evening, there was no reason to fret about the next day. She said her prayers hastily and sleepily. And she did not ask for forgiveness because she had been to the moving-pictures. They were her right. They rounded out that all but perfect day that she exclaimed over while she unlaced her shoes.

Two nights later, she and Sophie went again, and again she saw the man. This time he summoned enough courage to take a seat beside Sophie in the theatre. And when the lights went down,

he held Sophie's hand. That Phœbe did not like at all. It was all right on the screen, of course—holding hands. But with Sophie! And so close! It did not seem nice.

"Sally never acted like that," Phœbe told herself.

Also at the rear gate, as they were returning, the man grew bolder. So did Sophie. From a considerate distance, Phœbe saw the two embrace—saw their faces touch.

At that, Phœbe turned and walked away. She was angered.

But when Sophie joined her, giggling and whispering, she made no comment. Only she resolved that she would not go out at night with Sophie again if the man was to accompany them home. And before she lay down in the dark to sleep, she said a little prayer about it, and promised that she would not break her resolve.

But a few nights later, a change of program brought the moving-picture version of a play that she had seen acted in New York by men and women who spoke their lines. It was a temptation too great to resist. "Just this once more," vowed Phœbe.

The vow was to be kept—so far^o as this particular theatre, and this town, was concerned; but not kept in the way Phœbe had meant.

The picture was wonderful. She had so much to tell Sophie—of the differences between the play as it was flashed upon the cloth before them and as it was on the speaking stage. She was joyous and excited. When the man came, as before, she was even glad, for it was nice to be able to lean across Sophie and tell him about the differences. No regret for having broken her resolve troubled her.

And then something happened—between Part I and Part II of the picture, when the piano was going merrily, and Phœbe was looking over the audience. At first, she was conscious of a white face—a woman's face—turned her way. Next, with a sinking of the heart, she knew the face—Mrs. Botts!

She got up and turned in the other direction. Sophie pulled at her dress, and said something. Phœbe did not heed her. To get away, that was her only thought. She fumbled for, and found, her coat, and put on her hat. And with Sophie trailing behind her as people rose to let them pass,

Phœbe led the way out of the theatre to the sidewalk.

Mrs. Botts faced them. There was a cruel twist to her thin mouth. Her eyes were dancing. Her hands were on her hips. Her head was tipped sideways.

"So-o-o!" she triumphed. "This is the good Phœbe! She comes to make trouble for neighbors. But she goes out at night with servants. She is a sneak!"

Phœbe said nothing. She was too frightened, too bewildered. She guessed what Mrs. Botts would do, and was trying to think how to meet the inevitable. But she looked at Mrs. Botts calmly enough.

"A little sneak!" repeated Mrs. Botts. "Pah!" She snapped her fingers, threw back her head with a laugh, and walked away.

Phœbe said nothing. She took Sophie's hand and started home. The man, for once, did not join them. Phœbe did not even think about him. She was too miserable.

Sophie was also speechless, until, with an explosive outburst, as they neared the back gate,

she fell to crying and talking at the same time. Phœbe patted her arm.

"It's too bad," she said. "You took me, and now they'll blame you."

"What's done is done," wept Sophie.

"To think I did it while Daddy was away!" exclaimed Phœbe. Suddenly she felt amazed at the enormity of her own conduct. "How could I? Oh, Sophie!"

"That's just why y' could," retorted Sophie, with a show of spirit. "Your maw's gone, and your papa's away, and you're heart-broke. So, instead of lettin' you cry your eyes out, I took you to the movies, and helped y' forget. But none of them will understand." She halted by the chicken-coop to look up at the house, dimly outlined against the sky.

Phœbe looked up too. Sophie's last night! That was her thought. Her only comfort was to be taken from her. With new help at Grandma's, what kind of a place would it be?

"Oh, Sophie," she whispered, "let me go to Grandma's room right now, and tell her, and ask her to forgive us both!"

"Tell! Oh, my goodness!"

"Or I'll wake up Uncle Bob, Sophie! Oh, I can't stand it!"

"Do you want me to be fired?"

They walked on a little. Phœbe's head was down, her step lagged. She thought of Miss Ruth. If she could only turn aside to the Shepard house, standing white and temple-like in the starlight. There, so close, was one who would understand.

Sophie began to whisper again: "Don't peep, darlin'. 'Cause we're safe. I'll watch the phone. If Mrs. Botts calls up, I'll know what to say. If she writes, I'll burn the letter. And if she dares show her ugly face——!"

They went up the back stairs like shadows. Usually Sophie did not see Phœbe into the latter's room on late returnings from the theatre; but this time she entered, put on the light, turned down the bed, and said a fond good-night.

"I wish I could tell somebody," Phœbe insisted. "Because I—I feel awfully bad. I think it's my conscience."

But Sophie shook her head. "If they find out about us," she argued, "just remember this: They can't fire *you*. So don't you worry."

"I won't," answered Phœbe. But her face was

pale with apprehension. "And, anyhow, I've seen three wonderful five-reelers."

But when she was alone, and the light was out, she, too, broke down. "I deserve to be punished," she confessed. "I said I wouldn't go again, and I broke my word." She dropped to her knees beside the bed.

She prayed for her mother to ask God to take her. "I'm discouraged," she complained. "Oh, Mother, I want to come to you. Everything I like to do is bad in this house!" She recalled a day when Uncle John had been most displeased with her because, with an eye to harmonious color, she had rearranged the books in the library, putting the green-backed ones on one shelf, the red-backed ones on another.

Now, so real was her contrition and her fear, that not once as she knelt did it occur to her that what she had done, and what she was suffering, was in any way like a "movie".

She lay down at last, but with eyes wide and staring into the dark. It was one thing to steal away at night to the movies with Sophie, shoes in hand till the back steps were gained, giggles restrained till the rear gate was left behind, spirits high be-

cause of what the theatre promised of dear delight, the whole thing a thrilling adventure: it was another matter to face out the escapade in the full light of morning.

Oh, the dread of it! For of course Mrs. Botts would tell. Then, what? There would be bitter blame on the part of Uncle John. He would blame Sophie most (which was a comforting thought!). But Sophie was grown. Sophie was free. Sophie could be saucy, if she wanted to, and could pack up, and leave, her earnings in her purse. But Phœbe would have to stay; to face it out at the table; to live it down in shame.

"O-o-oh!" breathed Phœbe. She wrestled with despair.

A clock downstairs rang the hours until three. Then, exhausted, she slept—and in her sleep fought Mrs. Botts hand to hand.

When she awoke, she was sitting up. Dawn was at hand. She could tell that by the thin, white horizontal lines of the shutters. She sprang out of bed and began to dress.

Once she had packed to run away. There was no time to pack now. To go, that was her only thought. She ran a comb through her hair. She

threw her serge coat over her arm, and took her hat in her hand. Then with a hurried good-bye kiss for her mother's pictured face, she stole out and down, bound for New York, and the dear apartment, and faithful Sally.

CHAPTER XXI

It was a glorious morning. The sun was not up yet, so the air was cool—even crisp; and Phœbe, making her way quietly through the rear gate and along that road used by the tradesmen, had to slip on her coat. She halted a moment under some trees that stood, occupying a whole lot, between the Blair house and the railroad station. And as she settled her coat, the birds called down at her. They were just awaking!

Phœbe had no thought of taking a train for New York. In the first place, she had no money, having spent her last penny at the theatre; in the second place, the station-agent knew her, and would report her departure. She did not even go near the station. What she did was to take her direction from it down the long macadam road that led, straight and smooth, beside the double line of rails.

That way lay New York! She would walk till an automobile came by. Then she would ride as far as possible, perhaps walk some more, sleep at

pleasant farm-houses along the route, take up her journey the following morning, and thus, by easy stages, reach the loved city and Sally.

The whole plan seemed so feasible that as she turned into the road at a point well south of the station, she wondered why she had never thought of it before. And it was so jolly, trotting along like this! She felt free, and strong, and happy. And very brave.

"Mother would want me to leave there," she told herself. "She never liked any of them."

The sun came up. The birds began their morning songs. Phœbe took off her coat, then her hat. When she spied an automobile rushing toward her from the distance, she went aside to crouch in the deep, weed-grown ditch that stretched between the wagon road and the track, covered her face with her coat, stayed motionless for a few minutes—then went merrily on.

It was the first eluding of a car bound townward that made her think how exciting this adventure of hers was. And with that thought came another—a wonderful one! It made her heart beat fast. She fairly skipped. Tears of joy sprang to

her eyes. She *would* be a moving-picture actress!
And act with William S. Hart!

Why had she never thought of leaving before—to carry out the plan?

She was so happy over her determination that she all but allowed herself to be seen by an automobile that, with milk-cans rocking and clanking, shot past on its way out of town. She was not ready yet to ask for a ride. That would come later, when a village to the south was at her back, and the chances of her being recognized had lessened. Just now, with her new idea in mind, she felt so happy and light-footed that she needed no rides. She knew she could go on walking all day!

But there was something she had forgotten: breakfast. Very soon she remembered it—at about the time she was accustomed to having it. And as she trotted along she thought of her cereal and cream, her three-minute egg, and the little stack of crisp, hot buttered toast that Sophie always brought with the egg.

Phœbe looked on either hand for houses. She had passed quite a few, but they were set so far back from the highway that she had not feared being seen from them. But if she was to have even

a bite of breakfast, would it not be necessary to go boldly up to one, and ring the bell, and ask for food?

"No," said Phœbe, aloud. "They'd telephone straight into town. I'll just have to stand it till I get farther."

Her trot changed to a trudge. The summer sun climbed the sky, and the coolness went out of the air. She grew thirsty, and forgot her hunger in her desire for water. What made things harder was the fact that automobiles or wagons were frequent now, and she had to be on the lookout constantly, and was constantly compelled to forsake the road for the deep ditch while travellers went by.

Then there were the trains—both freight and passenger. She hid from them. From the north they might carry people who would know that she was missing; from the south they would take news of a lone little girl walking toward New York.

Toward noon she went aside into a clump of trees to rest. Here she found water—a shallow, unshaded pool of it. But it was not the kind she had always been accustomed to, cold and limpid and clean; it was warm, and a thin scum floated upon its surface. Also, there were long-legged, nervous,

insects going about upon it jerkily. She had to drive them away before she could drink.

Once she had left the New York road, somehow she did not want to return to it. She was afraid of discovery. As noon came and passed, there were more automobiles and wagons to elude, and even more trains. Once she saw a man on foot, with a dog at his heels. She remembered a moving picture she had once seen in which dogs had been used to find a murderer. She wondered if the man and the dog would not soon be hunting for her!

At that she started off once more, going parallel to track and road, but keeping well out of sight from both. This meant hard work, for there was cultivated land to cross, there were fences to climb, and whenever a house loomed up ahead, it was necessary for Phœbe to make what to her was a heart-breaking detour.

By the middle of the afternoon she was exhausted. Ahead of her, in a field, she saw a hay-stack. She was famished, and more thirsty than ever. But her knees were failing her. Above all things she needed rest. She crossed the field, sought the shady side of the stack, gathered together a little

loose hay with which to make a bed, and dropped upon it, her hat screening her face.

She awoke with a start, knowing she was not alone, and with a cry of fear scrambled to her feet. A man was beside her—a young man with a very brown face, and dark eyes that twinkled. He had curly black hair, and wore a black slouch hat.

"Hullo," said the man, grinning.

"Goo-good-afternoon," returned Phœbe, catching up her hat as she backed away. She did not like the looks of the man. He made her think of gypsies.

"What you doin' out here?" went on the stranger. He looked her over impudently.

Phœbe knew that she must give this man a satisfactory answer. And she felt, she scarcely knew why, that she must not let him think she was alone. "My father has just gone over to that house," she answered, trying to keep her voice even. "I'm very hungry, and my father has gone to get me something to eat."

"Is that so!" The man considered her explanation, and even turned about to look toward the house she had indicated. "Well, how does it hap-

pen your father and you are hangin' around this hay-field?" he persisted.

"Well,"—Phœbe saw that she had partly convinced him—"my father's automobile broke down, over there on the road. But I had to have something to eat before he fixed it, so he's going to ask for food over there, and for gasoline."

"Say!" resumed the young man, dropping his voice confidentially; "you stay here, and I'll go over and meet your father, and help him carry the things—eh?"

"All right," agreed Phœbe, heartily. (Anything to get rid of the stranger!) "And tell my father please to bring plenty of water." (This was a master stroke!)

"I'll bring it. Now, you set down, and I'll be back with water and grub in no time." He gave her a final look, then started off quickly.

It was plain that he only half believed her. He was going to learn for himself whether or not her father was at the farm-house. He was counting on her hunger and thirst to hold her there in the strip of shade while he was gone. Her instinct told her that.

It told her more. She knew she must get away.

But not at once. The shady side of the stack did not face toward the farm-house. Soon the man, reaching the fence that skirted the yard, would be out of sight of Phœbe were she to remain in the shade, for a corner of the hay would hide her. She waited.

Presently, peering around that corner, she saw the man climb the fence. As he stepped on the farther side, she stood boldly in sight. He looked around toward her, and she swung her hat at him!

He waved back, and turned away.

Then she ran—straight in the opposite direction, and as hard as she could go. Terror gave her strength, terror of she knew not what. She forgot hunger and thirst and weariness: she thought only of putting distance between herself and that man.

Her way led her back to the road. Even as she set foot upon it, an automobile turned into it from a side lane that ran at right angles to road and track. The machine was a small, open car, driven by an elderly man. Phœbe went to the middle of the road and held up her hand.

"He isn't from town," she argued. "Nobody's told him about me."

The elderly man stopped. "Want a ride?" he called down cheerily.

"Would you mind?" inquired Phœbe. "You see I want to go to town, because my aunt, who's camping over here,"—she waved a hand in the direction of the hay-stack—"feels sort of sick, and wants some medicine."

"Climb in," was the hearty invitation.

Phœbe climbed. Then, calling upon her imagination, and aided by moving-picture plots she could recall, she told the elderly man all about herself and her aunt, and how they came to be camping out behind a hay-stack in a farmer's field. And so real was her story, and so genuine seemed her concern for her aunt, that the elderly man was hugely interested, and gave Phœbe some plums out of his coat pocket.

As they spun along, Phœbe fell to wondering what she would do when they arrived in town. For she feared the man would take her directly to a drug-store, and there she would have to confess that she had no money. Of course she could say that, somehow, she had lost it. But suppose the man not only bought the medicine she would

have to ask for, but insisted on carrying her back to a point on the road nearest that stack!

Worse! Suppose as they entered the little town that an officer of the law hailed them, to ask if Phœbe was not the little girl who had run away that morning! And suppose——

But to Phœbe's intense relief none of the several possibilities she feared came to pass. For the reason that the man, when he reached the outskirts of the town, came to a stop and explained that he would have to turn aside for a mile or so, and would not be able to take Phœbe all the way into town.

"Just the same," he added, "if you'll be at this spot an hour from now, I'll pick you up as I start home."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Phœbe, grateful. But she was not thanking him for his offer. Her gratitude was for the ride and for the almost miraculous escape from being carried into town. She climbed down, waved a good-bye, and watched the little open car whirl away in a cloud of dust down a long dirt road that led under a small bridge.

That bridge gave her an idea. She had the plums,

and she was too tired to go farther until she had more rest and sleep. "I'll hide," she determined, "and I'll eat two of the plums, and then I'll sleep. And early tomorrow morning, I'll go round this town before anybody's up."

At one end of the bridge, and under it, where the timbers met the earth, there was a little scooped-out place, as if some one no larger than Phœbe had been there before her and hollowed a resting place for her. She crawled into it, lay on one side with her face toward the macadam road, ate all of the plums, broke the pits by using two stones that were at hand, ate the pits and liked them, then covered herself with her coat, laid her head on her hat, and slept.

First, however, she said her prayers. She remembered that she had told lies that afternoon. "I had to tell them," she pleaded. None the less, they were lies, and she dared not sleep with them on her conscience.

When she awoke, it was night, and she was cold. What awoke her was a train, plunging past her overhead, with shrieks of its whistle, a roar of wheels, and a clanking as of many chains.

She smiled to herself in the dark. What would the people on the train say if they knew that beneath them, as they tore along, was a little girl who was running away? "Some day, when I'm a famous actress," she promised herself, "I'll write all about this to the newspapers. And then the people in the train will remember, and be awfully interested."

She was strangely unafraid. For one reason, she felt so secure. In the first place, she must be many miles from home. They would not think of searching for her at such a distance. If they did, who in the world would ever dream (if he were to pass that bridge) that she was curled up snugly under one end of it? "I couldn't have found a better place," she declared, pleased with her own judgment. "Tomorrow night I'll hunt another bridge just like this."

She tucked her coat more carefully about her, then composed herself for more sleep. She heard little noises about her, as if a rabbit were out, or a badger. She felt that rabbits and badgers would add a touch to her story—that story she would write about herself when she was famous. She began to

word it now. The account merged into something her father was saying. It was: "She hasn't gone past here. I feel sure of that. Let's take our time——"

CHAPTER XXII

"LET's take time——"

Phoebe opened her eyes. It was broad daylight. Another train was passing overhead, shutting out the sound of the voice. She raised herself a little, and peered to both sides.

What she saw was men—two lines of them! Each was a little distance away from his nearest neighbors. All were walking in the same direction—toward the little town. The train gone, Phoebe could hear the men calling to one another. She wondered what it was all about.

Then she knew! They were hunting her! If they found her, they would drag her out, all dusty as she was, and carry her back with them. And she would be laughed at, and talked about, and pointed out, as if she were wicked, or crazy.

Once she had told herself that she did not care what the town thought or said. Now she knew that if she were to return, a culprit, she could not bear it, could not face anyone again. She had feared

to face them all—Uncle John in particular—after her discovery by Mrs. Botts. But now—! This was a thousand times worse!

When Uncle John had told her that her mother was dead, she had not thought of dying. But now she longed to die. There flashed across her mind the picture of herself as they would find her. Perhaps she would be lying, pale and still, on some flowery, sunny slope, where, faint from lack of food and drink, she had at last sunk down. Or, better still, she would be washed by the waves toward some shore, and the moon would shine on her white face, and her hair would float out on the water.

She heard steps. Farther back against the timbers she crouched, and held her hat before her face.

Then the voice began again—"Somebody would've seen her, I tell you, if she'd passed." She lifted her head, unable to believe her ears. Her father's voice! And he was in Peru!

Then two men moved into sight from the direction of the wide road. One was a stranger. The other was her father. As they halted under the bridge, Phœbe gave a great cry, and half crawled,

half rolled, from her hiding-place. Her face was streaked with dirt, her hair tangled, her dress rumpled. Sobbing, she almost fell down the embankment to her father's arms.

"Daddy! Oh, Daddy! Daddy! Oh, Daddy, forgive me! Forgive——!"

He caught her to him, and she knew that he was weeping, too. Oh, the joy of having his arms about her, of feeling herself back in his tender care! Men were running toward them from both directions, shouting as they came. Shots were being fired. It was all because she was found. But she hid her face and clung to her father. What mattered if only she had him?

"Dear baby!" he was saying. "Oh, my precious little girl! Oh, were they bad to her while Daddy was away? He'll never go again—he'll never leave his darling again——"

He carried her through the crowd that had gathered, and stepped with her into the tonneau of an automobile. The car turned slowly. A great cheer went up. Nearby a church bell began to ring. Then the ride home began.

Phœbe lay as she had lain that afternoon and evening on the train, her head pillowed on her fa-

ther's shoulder, her feet curled up on the wide seat. But now her father talked to her, lovingly, soothingly.

"She wanted to go back to New York, my baby," he said.

"Yes,—oh, yes!"

"Well, she shall! She shall!"

"Oh, Daddy, do you mean it?"

"Darling, I was keeping that as a surprise."

She threw her arms about him. She drew herself up so that she could speak, her lips at his ear. The man who was driving them—he must not hear. "Daddy," she whispered, "just you and I will go? Nobody else?"

He was puzzled. "Why—why, who else?" he asked.

"Oh, nobody, Daddy! Thank you! Thank you!" Contentedly she rested her cheek once more against his coat.

"The little apartment is all ready," he went on; "and Sally is waiting. And down there not a soul shall ever know——"

She nodded. "About this."

"Not a soul," he promised. Then to the man, "Speed up!"

They were nearing town now. The driver fairly tore past the depot, and along one short street to the gate of the Blair grounds. The gate was open, and the car whisked through a little group of the curious who were waiting. Another group, with more boldness, was at the front porch. But the automobile did not stop here. Taking to the lawn, it circled the house to the rear entrance. Grandma was there. And Phœbe's father was out of the tonneau and up the steps to the kitchen before anyone could follow them.

In the rear hall, Phœbe was set upon her feet. Her father knelt beside her, wiping her face and smoothing her hair. Grandma joined them, speaking not at all, but shaking her head very hard. There were tears on her old cheeks. Grandma did not look angry—only glad and sad! Phœbe, glancing at her, knew that in the future there would never be any blaming on Grandma's part.

But Uncle Bob!—what about him? He was the Children's Judge, used to dealing with young wrong-doers. Mrs. Botts had called Phœbe "a little sneak". What would Uncle Bob do to a little sneak?

All nervous and frightened and tired as she was,

there flashed across her brain the picture of herself up before this dearer of her two uncles—before him at the very bar of his terrible Court, her head hanging while scores of strangers stared at her, and Uncle Bob passed judgment!

Then she heard the door open. It was not Sophie—the step was too slow and too heavy. The door closed, softly.

Phœbe knew who it was; she held her breath.

“Little old dumpling!”

Phœbe turned. “Oh, Uncle Bob, I’m sorry—and—and I’m ashamed!”

“I see both sides of this question,” he said gently.

She held out her arms in a wild, tearful appeal. “Then you won’t arrest me! You won’t take me to Court!”

It brought him to her in a rush. He put his arms about her, and gave a great gulping laugh, and hugged her.

In Phœbe’s inmost soul there was no real fear of his punishing her publicly. But the growing woman in her sensed the dramatic, and enjoyed it. Also, she knew how to touch the big heart of this uncle; the heart of her father, too!

“Phœbe!”—Uncle Bob was reproving her lov-

ingly. "Going to the movies isn't a State's Prison offence—not yet!"

She felt suddenly weak and faint. Someone put a glass to her lips—a glass of warm milk. It was Grandma. She tried to smile as she drank. Grandma was smiling at her.

When the glass was drained, Uncle Bob caught her up. "No, Jim, let me carry her," he begged. (Phœbe felt like a real heroine!)

At that moment, the thing most dreaded came to pass. The dining-room door opened. Through it came Uncle John. "My dear child," he began.

Uncle Bob halted, Phœbe in his arms. "Not a word!" he cried, his voice trembling with anger. "I won't have Phœbe picked on. If you're wise, you'll stop fighting the movies and fight *with* them—fight for better pictures. Don't tear down—*improve!*" Then he went on.

There was a happy surprise awaiting Phœbe when her room was reached. The surprise was Miss Ruth, with one of Sophie's big aprons pinned about her. She received Phœbe from Uncle Bob, and there was no mistaking her joy. It was Miss Ruth who tended Phœbe, undressed and bathed her, helped her to bed, and brought her the broth.

"You won't go, will you?" whispered Phæbe, lying back among the pillows. "Please don't leave me!"

"I wouldn't think of it," declared Miss Ruth. She took a seat beside the bed.

Phæbe sighed, snuggled her cheek against Miss Ruth's hand, and slept.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNCLE BOB was exasperated. He was talking to Phœbe's father. Phœbe could hear him, from where she lay on the sofa in Grandma's bedroom.

"A person would think you're first-cousin to a mule!" cried Uncle Bob. "What makes you so stubborn, Jim? Don't you *see* what you ought to do!—Oh, my goodness, the thing is all so simple!"

Phœbe could hear someone walking, to and fro, to and fro, across Uncle Bob's room. Then, "Well, you see, old man, the trouble is there isn't anybody,"—and Phœbe's father laughed. (What were they talking about?)

"You can't think of anybody?" scolded Uncle Bob. "Well, I can."

"Yes?"

"I've got it all fixed up."

The footsteps halted. Again Phœbe's father laughed. "You're a wonder!" he cried. "Well, your Honor, who is it?"

"You know."

There was silence for a moment. Phœbe's father answered then, but he spoke very gravely. "No, no," he said. "I know who you mean. And that would never do."

"What's the matter with her?" Uncle Bob was impatient.

"Nothing,"—calmly. Phœbe heard the scratch of a match.

"You bet your life there's nothing the matter with her!" (Who was "her"?)

"What makes you think she'd fall in with your plans, old brother?"

"First hand information. She told me that she cared."

Phœbe's father laughed again, but in a curious way. "I don't believe it," he said.

"It's true. I made her confess." (Confess! "Are they talking about me?" Phœbe asked herself.)

"Bob!—But that wasn't fair! not fair to her!"

"I know," agreed Uncle Bob, contritely. "But I did it for the sake of the child.—Oh, Jim, before you go——"

"Before I go," returned Phœbe's father, quietly, "I won't do something unworthy."

"Unworthy? What do you mean?"

"Along with the rest, Bob, I happen to know that *you* care."

"*I?*—Say!" Now Uncle Bob laughed. "Who on earth's been telling you fish stories?"

"Bob, ⁱyou're a wise old bird. But you don't fool me."

"Jim, you've been listening to one of Phœbe's moving-picture yarns!" (Phœbe sat up. They *did* mean her!)

"Judge," said Phœbe's father, "I can beat you at golf."

It was then that, suddenly, Uncle Bob seemed completely to change. He grew more earnest, his voice rose. "Oh, listen, Jim!" he begged. "I've taken her around a little——"

"No, Bob,—no! no! no!"

Phœbe leaned back, completely at a loss to understand any of it. Fish stories? Moving-pictures? Golf? And that "her" again!

"Yes, I tell you!" insisted Uncle Bob. "You ought to have done this fifteen years ago."

"Is that so!" retorted Phœbe's father, sarcastically. "Well, fifteen years ago I wouldn't step in your way."

"I!" Uncle Bob laughed, but not pleasantly. "Old, and fat, and bald."

"I will not do it," said Phœbe's father.

"And I won't be a dog in the manger!" Uncle Bob struck a hard surface with his fist.

"Bob, *please* drop it."

"You're a nice father!" taunted Uncle Bob. "You're a peach! Letting me or anyone else come before Phœbe." ("It is about me," declared Phœbe. "I'm 'her,' after all.") "My life's half over, Jim: Hers is just beginning."

"You're a blessed old brother,"—and Phœbe could tell that her father felt deeply as he spoke, for his voice shook. "But listen to me, Bob: When we went tramping, as boys, if I got tired you always dragged me along by the hand. And how you always shared everything with me! Well, you're my old side partner, and I won't do this thing—I won't!"

"Jim, I'm a poor pill if I can't practice what I'm always preaching from the Bench: The child comes first."

"Listen!" insisted Phœbe's father, gently. "I had my chance at happiness, Bob, and I made a mess of it. But—I've got Phœbe, and you——"

"Forget me! I'm out of it. And why should you cheat yourself? And her?"

"Sh!"

Phœbe's father was standing in the door of Grandma's room, staring down at the figure on the sofa. "Have you been here all the time?" he asked.

"Yes, Daddy."

"Mm. Haven't been asleep, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Well, do you think you can stand some very good news?" He came to her.

"Oh,—not back!—not New York!—*oh!*" Phœbe sprang up, holding out both arms. "When?"

He drew her to him. "Tomorrow. So get all the rest that you can today, little girl. Tomorrow at this time we'll be whirling along."

Uncle Bob was watching them. "You mean it?" he asked Phœbe's father. "You're going to leave? And not say a word?—Oh, it's all wrong, Jim! It's all wrong!"

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT was all wrong? What word did Uncle Bob want Daddy to say? And to whom? In particular, what was it that Uncle Bob wanted Daddy to do? And who, oh, who, was "*her*"?

She longed to go down to the kitchen and ask Sophie. But she knew there was no use—Sophie would tell her nothing. Just now Sophie was on her best behavior, and was taking a distinctly grown-up attitude toward Phœbe. She had come close to being dismissed. And she had not been independent about it. For what she had done was, by the very nature of the case, known throughout the town, which meant that other families might not care to hire a girl who had stolen out in the evening to a theatre, taking with her a child. Uncle John had pointed this out to Sophie, adding that he would make it his business to see she did not deceive any other employer.

Uncle John and Sophie had had what Phœbe guessed was a most exciting interview. Phœbe was

almost sorry to have missed it. While Uncle Bob and Phœbe's father were out and away, searching, Uncle John had attended to Sophie.

Grandma told Phœbe (in a whisper!) that Sophie had knelt in front of Uncle John, weeping grievously over Phœbe's disappearance, blaming herself bitterly, and pleading for forgiveness. Uncle John had been sternness itself. At first, he had declared for one course: Sophie must go. Later, when Sophie vowed that she would give up moving-pictures, he had softened a little. Still later, she brought down to him all the photographs she owned of "movie" stars—forty-seven in all. She had thrown them into the fireplace in the library, and put a match to them. Then Uncle John had relented.

So Sophie was being a new Sophie—quiet of foot and tongue, and quiet of dress. For two days she had not even curled her hair!

"There's no use asking her," concluded Phœbe, feeling somewhat injured. That man, too, was responsible for the blame heaped on Sophie—that man who had tagged them home from the theatre, and sat with them twice. Phœbe was angry with him, too.

She was still puzzling her head over what Uncle Bob and her father had to say to each other, when here came the former—almost stealthily, with glances over his shoulder. His face was red; his eyes were solemn. Once inside the door of Grandma's room, he locked it!

"That's all right," he whispered. "Grandma knows." He came to sit beside the sofa.

For a long moment he did not speak. He patted her shoulder absentmindedly, and the small hand she had reached out to him—this dear uncle whom she was so soon to leave! All the while he looked past her, out of the window. And his lips, tight-pressed, worked in the way they had when he was framing something important.

When he finally spoke, it was with great gentleness. "Of course, I wish you hadn't gone to that theatre without permission," he began. "But I wish more that you'd been so happy here at home that even a movie wouldn't have tempted you. But you haven't been happy. You've been shut up like a bird in a cage. No chums, no fun, no school—though Uncle John has tried to do his best." He stroked her cheek.

Phœbe nodded. "He's talked about my soul," she reminded. "But—I guess it hasn't helped."

Another wait, with no patting of her shoulder, nor stroking of her cheek. Then with a sudden move he fairly lifted Phœbe from the sofa and held her at arm's length. His face—Phœbe had never before seen it with this expression. It was white now, and his eyes stared into hers. His lips were trembling. He breathed like a man who is gathering himself for a leap.

"Phœbe," he began again, "if Uncle John failed, it's because he couldn't help it. You see, only mothers understand little souls. Dear old dumpling, let Uncle Bob tell you what's wrong! You've got just about everything that any small girl could ask for—good food, and a roof, and clothes, and relatives, and a wonderful daddy. But the most important thing——"

She understood. "My mother."

"You've been so brave. Oh, Uncle Bob has watched, and understood how you've grieved since your mother went. She can't come back to you—you realize that. And—and wouldn't it be best if—if you—that is, certain care and companionship,

and love are coming to a girl your size—you need it, and so——”

He was floundering, he was stammering, and he was getting very red again. Phœbe regarded him with grave eyes.

“What do you mean, Uncle Bob?” she asked bluntly.

He took both her hands in a firm grasp. “I mean just this:” he answered firmly enough; “you need a new mother.”

She stood up, and drew away from him. “A step?”

“A step.”

“Oh, Daddy has promised that we’re to be alone together—with Sally.”

He nodded. “Suppose he has! How about getting a stepmother yourself?”

“But I don’t *want* one!” she protested. “I just want my real mother—like other girls have!” And then, in a quavering remonstrance against Fate, and with breast heaving, and clenched fists, “Oh, *why* haven’t I my mother! Even the kittens have a mother, and the little ducks have a mother!”

“Ah!” cried Uncle Bob, triumphantly, “you’ve made my point for me, young lady!”

"Point? What?"

"The little ducks have a stepmother!"

"M-m-mm!" That was a new thought. Phœbe sat down.

"That Plymouth Rock," went on Uncle Bob, "is a mighty good little hen."

"I never thought," agreed Phœbe. "Of course that hen is a step."

"Nice, kind little step! You see, my dear, some stepmothers are bad—like Mrs. Botts. And then some are just peaches—like Grandma."

Phœbe leaned closer. "Grandma?" she repeated. "You mean——?"

"Darling, we never told you. At first, for no reason, except that we boys—your daddy and Uncle John and I—have never used the word to each other, much less to anyone else. Afterwards, when I found you hated stepmothers—when Manila helped you to think them all bad—we still didn't tell you. We wanted you to learn to love Grandma dearly."

"I do." (Grandma! She of the gentle look and gentler voice, who did not know how to be cross or unkind, she was a stepmother!) "Then of

course," she added, "Grandma has never—er—whipped you."

He burst into laughter, throwing back his big head and slapping his knees. "Whipped!" he repeated. "Whipped! Oh, Phœbe!" Then, gravely, "That sweet mother-woman? Why, I couldn't love Grandma better if she were my own mother."

"You couldn't?"

"I never knew the difference," he declared earnestly. "She's been so wonderfully dear. And—you wouldn't either, Phœbe. No; very soon, you wouldn't either."

"I wonder," commented Phœbe. She was thinking aloud.

"Take your daddy," went on Uncle Bob. "He was just a little shaver when Grandma came to us. He wasn't strong—he didn't sleep. She spent night after night carrying him, mothering him. Grandma saved your daddy's life."

"Then Grandma is a good step," asserted Phœbe. Her eyes grew moist with quick gratitude.

"There are thousands of good steps," declared Uncle Bob.

"But Manila—see what Manila got!"

He smiled knowingly, mysteriously. "Manila's own fault," he said.

"No!"

"Yes. She made the mistake of not picking her own step."

"Manila's father picked Mrs. Botts," confided Phœbe.

"Mrs. Botts picked him," contradicted Uncle Bob. "Oh, Phœbe, I want you to trust me, to believe me!"

"Of course!" she cried.

"Phœbe,"—he rested a hand on either shoulder—"you need a good step. But you mustn't make Manila's mistake. You must not trust to your father's judgment. You—must—pick—that—step—*yourself*."

Phœbe gasped. "Myself?"

"Yourself—or you won't get one."

"But—but," she protested, trying to rise from beneath his hold.

He would not let her go. "Phœbe! Oh, Phœbe, listen to me! Your father guesses that you don't want him to marry. And so he won't. For that very reason *you* must choose your mother. And you must choose her before you go!"

"Before tomorrow?"

"This very afternoon!"

At that they both rose. There was that set look about Uncle Bob's jaw which Phœbe, learning the moods of men, recognized as a sign of determination. Before that big, glowing countenance and those clenched teeth, Phœbe weakened.

He saw that. "Oh, Phœbe," he pleaded, "there's so much that you must know for your own safety and happiness. My little girl, you didn't even realize what dangers lay along the Valley Road as you went! Think of it! It makes my heart sick when *I* think of it. Well, there must be someone beside you—some dear woman who will love you, someone you can trust and love!"

"But—but who—?" she faltered.

He drew back. "Mm,—yes, that's so. Now, who?" He took one of his characteristic turns, hands behind back, knuckles of one tapping the palm of the other. "Now who? Of course, it must be somebody nice."

She stared. "I should think so!"

"Well,"—Uncle Bob came about, suave and smiling once more—"there are any number of charm-

ing ladies about. Now let's just think. Mm! Who? For instance."

"We-e-ell." Phœbe gave him a sidewise look. Certain "movie" stars (she could think of two whom she adored!) had loomed first in her mind's eye. But considering what had so recently transpired, *could* she venture to mention these young goddesses to Uncle Bob? She felt she could not. And besides might not her father, if he were to marry one of them, find her so attractive that his little daughter——

Staunchly she put jealousy out of her heart. Once Mother had told her that there are different kinds of love, and one could not subtract from another. So if Daddy were to care for a new wife, it did not follow that he would care a whit less for his daughter. And so Phœbe met the problem at its nearest point—the drug-store.

"There's a new young lady down at Fletcher's," she informed Uncle Bob. "And she likes me better than the one did who has the baby. Because as soon as my ice-cream soda is gone, she asks me to have another. Now, wouldn't she do?"

Uncle Bob looked dubious. "It can't be somebody who will just 'do'."

"I suppose not."

"And there's Daddy. You know—in a way—we'll have to please him."

At that she felt more jealous than before; but she fought it. "Yes," she answered steadily, "we'll have to pick somebody that Daddy likes. —I'll think again."

Uncle Bob was thinking, for he was scratching his head as he walked. "Let me see," he mused. "Let me see." He gave a quick glance at Phoebe from under lowered lids.

"I can't seem to remember another good one," she announced apologetically.

Her uncle halted—abruptly. He brought his two fists up in front of him. He smiled, showing all of his teeth.

"Phoebe!" he cried.

"Yes?" Her eyes were a little fearful.

"Just the one!" He came to sit beside her.

"Who?" She sat very straight.

"Phoebe,"—he took her face between his hands; his kind blue eyes searched hers, shining upon her with infinite love; "Phoebe, how about Miss Ruth?"

She started. "Miss Ruth!" And that moment a strange thing happened to Phoebe. The forbid-

ding step-mother figure which had haunted her so long—the tall, bony, heavy-shouldered woman whose arms were like the arms of a gorilla that Phoebe had once seen at the Zoo in Bronx Park, in New York; that gray-haired, sullen-eyed, formidable, silent creature made out of childish imaginings—now stepped backward, as it were, out of Phoebe's brain; and to take the place that was left, there came forward Ruth Shepard, a tender smile lighting her eyes and curving her mouth—Ruth Shepard, with hands outstretched.

Phoebe drew a sobbing breath of relief. "She'd be perfect!" she declared. "She loves me, and I love her. And—and Daddy——"

"Phoebe," went on Uncle Bob, "your daddy loves Miss Ruth."

Phoebe blinked, trying to understand. "*Daddy* loves her?"

"Devotedly."

"And—you love her."

"I don't count."

Phoebe was puzzling something out: "You love her, and Daddy loves her, and you're two brothers——"

"And each wants the other to be happy," said

Uncle Bob, as if completing the sentence. "But you see, Miss Ruth loves your daddy; she's never loved anyone else—not since she wore braids down her back. So that's how it is, old, dumpling. And you'll understand why my own brother pulls back, and says No, and——" His voice broke.

"Uncle Bob," she asked tenderly, "are you *sure* you want Daddy to marry Miss Ruth? Because—because you're crying."

His eyes were indeed brimming. But through the tears shone a smile. He caught her to him, laughing down at her, pressing her head against his shoulder, pressing his cheek against her cheek. "Of course I'm crying," he said, not even trying to keep his voice even. "Because I know why you asked what you did. You think—you're afraid that old Uncle Bob will be terribly hurt, broken-hearted. And so your tender, precious thought is for him. Oh, little Phœbe! My sweet girl!" He choked. And fell to rocking her back and forth, not being able to go on.

"Yes," she whispered up to him. "That's why. Oh, dear Uncle Bob!"

"Well, Phœbe,"—he set her free, found his handkerchief, mopped his eyes with it, blew a re-

sounding blast, and took on a wider smile than ever—"this is the truth, little woman: I want Daddy to marry Miss Ruth better than anything else in the world."

Phoebe smiled back at him. Only fourteen years had those gray-blue eyes looked upon the big world, yet those years had brought Phœbe something of that age-long wisdom of woman which is called intuition. And as she looked at Uncle Bob, she knew that he was, at one and the same time, telling the whole truth and a great falsehood.

She put a hand against his cheek. "Precious Uncle Bob!" she whispered tremulously. And lowering her head, hid her face against his breast. He had freed her from the ugly vision that haunted: he had given her the promise of love and peace and joy. He had said he would do anything in the world to make her happy. Now he was keeping his word—he was giving up his hope of happiness in giving up Miss Ruth.

"More than anything, Phœbe," he repeated huskily.

She moved her head in assent. "Then he will," she said simply.

"But there isn't any time to lose!" Uncle Bob

stood up, wound his watch-chain round a finger, pulled the big silver time-piece from its pocket, consulted it hastily, and shoved it back. "I must get Miss Ruth. I'll telephone her house."

"Oh, but suppose she won't come," suggested Phoebe.

"What shall I say to her?" Uncle Bob looked suddenly helpless.

"I know!" A mischievous twinkle came back into Phoebe's eyes. "If she holds back you *scare* her!"

He gasped. "Scare her?"

"Once I saw it—in the movies," she confided excitedly. "Oh, Uncle Bob, you say to her, 'Poor Phoebe is dying!'"

He joined in her laughter. "You muggins! If I have to, I'll do it!" Then gravely, "When she gets here, go awful slow—take your time."

Phoebe gave him a wise smile. "At first, I'll just hint."

"Good. And—and there's something else: If I were you I wouldn't tell Miss Ruth that you've talked this over with me."

"I won't," she promised, understanding.

"Let her—and Daddy—think it was all your idea."

"If you think I'd better."

"I do. And, Phœbe, I'm not going to tell you what to say, or how to say it; I'm just going to let you follow your own blessed ideas."

Her eyes grew solemn. "You needn't be afraid," she answered reassuringly. "I know *just* how to do it. I've got a wonderful plan."

"Ah, fine!" Then a little awkwardly, "But—er—I wonder if you could manage (just this once) to tell a—a sort of a fib."

Phœbe laughed. "I guess so." And added, roguishly, "If it's a little one."

He sobered and leaned down to her, taking her hands. "It's important. Even if you don't understand why, oh, remember and believe what I tell you—it's *very* important. Phœbe, if Miss Ruth asks you who wanted you to do this, you must say it was Daddy."

"It was Daddy," she repeated.

He put a hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. He was smiling. The tears in his eyes were tears of joy. "Oh, my little girl," he said tenderly, "this is going to make everybody happy."



She looked up at him, not smiling, and not in the least deceived. She understood his sacrifice. It was made for her father, for Miss Ruth, for her. And that moment, Uncle Bob, ageing, growing stout, getting bald, was transformed to Phœbe, through her grateful love, into a figure all knightly and splendid and beautiful.

"I love you," she told him.

He swept her to him in another embrace. "Good luck!" he whispered. "Good luck, and God bless you!"—and was gone.

CHAPTER XXV

PHŒBE, standing at the center of her own room, slowly turned herself about, as if taking a farewell look at the big, old bed—so forbidding when contrasted with the dainty, bewreathed, ivory-tinted “twin” in which she had slept beside her mother; at the low heavy chest of drawers that held water-pitcher and bowl; at the marble-topped “dresser”, equally ugly, with its slab of stone like something out of a cemetery; at the tall, dark doors; the clothes-closet, that abode of fearful shapes; the high-backed chairs; and the ancient sofa.

And yet she was not saying good-bye to the room and the familiar objects in it so much as she was to the life she had led there. A swift change was coming. But not a change merely from the big room in the big, lonely house to the dear surroundings in New York. That transfer was indeed to be made. But there was more about to happen—a glorious thing! And it was she, Phœbe Shaw Blair, who was to bring it to pass!

She laughed a little, out loud. Then suddenly, for no reason, she covered her face with both hands, and kissed her palms as if they were the palms of another's hands. "Oh, she *must* say Yes!" she cried. "Uncle Bob wants her to!"

She was all ready. Her face was rosy after a quick wash in the bowl. Her hair glistened even with a hurried brushing. She had on white stockings, and her newest black pumps, and a fresh smock-dress that was pale blue.

She looked down at herself and laughed again. Here she was, who had wept and worried at the mere idea of a stepmother, and had even been glad that Miss Ruth was rather cool to Daddy—here she was, actually scheming to get a stepmother, which stepmother was to be that same Miss Ruth!

She went up to the mirror and looked into it. "Phœbe!" she whispered. "Oh, you're such a *funny* girl!"

She sobered. Her glance had caught her mother's photograph. She took it up, holding it in both hands, close, and speaking to it as if to the living. "Oh, you won't mind?" she faltered. "Oh, Mother, try to tell me that you won't mind!"

She held the photograph against her. Was she being faithless to her own mother, in taking a new one? She turned to an open window, and looked up.

Somewhere in the vast sky was her dear one, more beautiful now, and always to be beautiful and young. Uncle John said this was true of all who died. And even though Uncle John did not like her mother he could not say that she fared any differently than all the others who went away. Out of the great blue was Mother looking down now upon her little girl? And how? Happily? Or in sorrow?

Phœbe looked at the picture again. There was a tender smile on the lovely face. The eyes looked full into her daughter's.

"Oh, I know you don't mind!" cried Phœbe. "You don't mind!" She knelt at the open window. Great white clouds lay against the blue. Phœbe understood that her mother was beyond them—farther. She shut her eyes, praying.

"Oh, Mother, thank you!" she whispered. "It isn't about Daddy you mind—I know that. But about me—you believe I won't love you any less, ever. Oh, Mother, you'll see I won't forget you

even for Miss Ruth. Don't let it hurt, will you? Don't be a weeny speck jealous. Oh, precious Mother!"

She kissed the picture, and got up, strangely comforted. There was some pink tissue-paper in the bottom drawer of the dresser. She took it out and carefully wrapped the photograph. Then she opened the clothes-closet and found the suit-case.

The lining of the cover was loose at one corner, and two or three little things were under there, hidden! A valentine from a boy! Some hair-pins, picked up now and then, and useful, on occasions, for trial attempts at putting up her hair. And there was a picture post-card. A girl had given it to her—one of Miss Simpson's girls. Phœbe did not quite understand the meaning of the picture on that card. But from the look in the girl's eyes, from the curious expression of her mouth, Phœbe had sensed that the post-card was not nice.

Now she tore it up, with a smart ripping of the pasteboard that had not a little resentment in it. They were so "select", those Simpson girls! Yes! But one of them had pictures like this! Well, it could not stay in the same place with Mother's photograph!

The secret little place cleansed of its evil holding, Phœbe pressed the pink-wrapped photograph to her breast, and to her lips; then slipped it under the loosened lining. For with more understanding than fourteen may be credited with, Phœbe realized that any picture of Mother had best be put away, kept for herself only—not for her father, or for the dear presence that was to share a new happy home.

CHAPTER XXVI

"MAY I go right in?—Phœbe! Oh, Phœbe, I'm so frightened! Darling,—why—why, you're much better!"

Miss Ruth had entered with a rush, to find Phœbe just emerging from the clothes-closet. Miss Ruth was breathless, and a little pale. Now she dropped the hat she was carrying, and knelt on the carpet, and caught Phœbe to her.

"Yes, I'm—I'm much better," declared Phœbe. She bent to kiss Miss Ruth's hair.

Miss Ruth hid her face against Phœbe's breast. "I'm so glad! So glad!" she said tenderly.

"You see," admitted Phœbe, "I wasn't truly sick."

Miss Ruth looked up. "But the Judge said——"

Phœbe nodded. "I know. Only I—I've just been pretending."

"Phœbe!" laughed Miss Ruth. Then, suddenly grave, "Oh, you don't know how it hurt to have you missing that day! Oh, Phœbe, I'm so happy

that you're just pretending!" Then, catching sight of the pumps, and, next, of the blue smock, "Why, Phœbe, this dress! Something's happened!"

"No," declared Phœbe, "not yet. But, Miss Ruth, get ready! Something's *going* to happen!"

"To me?" Miss Ruth sat back. Her hair was rumpled. She looked very young and girlish.

"To both of us," promised Phœbe, solemnly.

"Ho—ho!"

"It's something awfully important," cautioned Phœbe.

"Dear me! Well, I think I'd better get up, then, and be prepared." Miss Ruth seated herself on the sofa. "Now! I'm all curiosity. Is there anything I'm supposed to do?"

Phœbe thought a moment. "Ye-e-es. Let me see. —I think you can lean back."

"Ah!" Miss Ruth made herself comfortable against a cushion. "I like this, because I ran all the way over." She smiled at Phœbe provokingly. "And now what?"

"Now try to look just as pretty as you can."

Miss Ruth laughed. "Oh, I'll do my best," she declared.

Phœbe shook her head at her. "I'm not joking,"

she said earnestly. "You know you are pretty."

"Oh, give me a kiss!" cried Miss Ruth, laughing again, and leaning to catch at the blue smock.

But Phœbe backed away. "No," she said firmly, "it's too soon——"

"Too *soon*?" Miss Ruth was puzzled.

"Yes. You see this has to be done in a certain way."

"Oh."

"Right now, a kiss would be turning everything upside down." Phœbe was very much in earnest.

"Well! Well!" Miss Ruth tried to look properly impressed.

"Next," continued Phœbe, "I come close to you, and I look at you, showing that I love you."

"Phœbe!" Now Miss Ruth caught at Phœbe's hand.

"No! Holding hands *also* comes later."

"I see." Miss Ruth leaned back once more.

"Of course, you're surprised that I love you——"

"But I'm not!"

"You will be when you hear it all," threatened Phœbe. "And right now you ought to drop your eyes."

Miss Ruth looked down. It was as if she under-

stood, suddenly, what it all meant. Her face grew grave, and softly pink.

"That's better," said Phoebe, admiringly. "So this is when I reach and take your hand." She took Miss Ruth's hand gently, and held it between both her own. Once, in a charming picture, she had seen Mr. Henry Walthall do precisely that. "Miss Shepard," she went on, "the first day I met you, I liked you very much. That was before—Mother—went away. I was unhappy, and you were so good to me. You knew how I felt."

"Ah, my dear," breathed Miss Ruth. She leaned forward, holding out the other hand.

"Wait!" pleaded Phoebe. "Because I'm not done. Miss Ruth, day after day, for all these months, I've liked you more and more. Now I know that I love you better than I do my relations."

"Phoebe, no!" Miss Ruth stared in amazement.

"Yes! Oh, not more than Daddy, because he's not a relation. But, Miss Ruth, I love you as much as I do Daddy."

"And I love you," said Miss Ruth.

Phoebe dropped to the carpet at Miss Ruth's knee. "How much?" she asked. "Oh, think hard before you say!"

"I hardly know how much." She took Phœbe's face between her hands. "But very, very much."

"Do you love me so much that you'd do something wonderful for me?—something that would make me the happiest girl in the whole world?"

"What, darling?" Miss Ruth bent close. Her look searched Phœbe's face.

Phœbe had meant to go on just as Mr. Henry Walthall would have gone on—"Miss Shepard, dear little woman, say Yes to me," and then add, "Be my mother, and Daddy's loving wife!" But she forgot how Mr. Walthall had knelt and looked, forgot to be solemn and poised; and completely out of her thoughts went all that she had planned to say. Instead she threw her arms about Miss Ruth, and clung to her wildly. "Oh, you must come with us!" she cried. "We can't live without you. Daddy adores you! And *I* do! Oh, Miss Ruth, I think I've *inherited* it!"

Miss Ruth gently freed herself from the hold of the young arms. Then without speaking, she drew back from Phœbe. "My dear," she said quietly, "who told you to say that?"

Phœbe hesitated. The truth was that Sophie had put the idea of inheritance into Phœbe's head.

Once Phœbe had protested to Sophie her great affection for Miss Ruth. Whereupon Sophie, with a wise nod, had said, "Sure y' do. You inherited it."

But the truth would not do! Uncle Bob had told Phœbe what to say, and she must obey him. It was a fib, and it was not a little one. But it would do much—for herself; for Miss Ruth; last, and most important, for the dear father, who, long ago, had put aside his own dreams for the sake of the elder brother he loved.

Phœbe looked straight into Miss Ruth's eyes. "Who?" she repeated. "Why, it was Daddy."

Miss Ruth caught her close, held her for a long moment during which neither moved nor spoke, then pushed back her hair and kissed her. "Phœbe, dear," she said, "I want to tell *you* something. From the moment I first saw *you* I loved you, just as you loved me,—oh, so tenderly! I loved you because you were you; and then, I loved you for another reason——"

"What?" whispered Phœbe.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Phœbe remembered Uncle Bob. She nodded. "I'm keeping several," she declared.

"Phœbe," said Miss Ruth, speaking very low, "I loved you because you were *his* little daughter."

"Daddy's?"

"Your dear, fine Daddy's!"

"Then you'll be my mother! Oh, Miss Ruth, say that you will! Say you'll come! Say Yes! Say Yes!"

"My little daughter!" faltered Miss Ruth. She laid her cheek against Phœbe's hair.

It was then that Phœbe heard a heavy step—heard the door close, and the step come toward them. "Ruth!" said a voice. (Uncle Bob had sent some one else!)

Miss Ruth rose, lifting Phœbe with her. The two stood, arms about each other, waiting. But Miss Ruth's look was lowered. Only Phœbe silently beseeched her father.

"Dearest," he said presently,—and he was not speaking to Phœbe; "I suppose there's no use fighting against it."

"No," she answered. "No use."

"Because *he* wants it," went on Phœbe's father; "dear old Bob. He's the one that's fixed this up?" He came a step nearer.

Miss Ruth looked up then. "My heart was

breaking," she whispered, "at the thought of having you go."

"Ruth!" He held out his arms to her, and she went to him.

Phœbe scarcely knew what to do. She had never seen just this situation on the screen. But instinct told her that it would be best, perhaps, to let Daddy and Miss Ruth have this moment to themselves. So Phœbe turned aside, and looked out of a window at the branches that were close and the clouds that were far. And valiantly she tried to forget the two behind her, and hear only the birds.

"I want you, Ruth," her father was saying. "Oh, I've always wanted you!"

"You do love me!" answered Miss Ruth. "Dear Jim!"

"*Tweet-tweet!*" added a sparrow outside. He had his head on one side, precisely, Phœbe thought, as if he were trying to look in. Oh, the prying little thing! Phœbe swung one hand at him.

"And Phœbe?" It was Miss Ruth, turning to speak, so softly.

"Yes, Mother?" said Phœbe.



